

The Riddle of Tarot

An Interpretation of the Allegorical Design of Early Tarot

We can derive some entertainment from asking why that particular selection was made, and whether there is any symbolic meaning to the order in which they were placed; and we may or may not come up with a plausible or illuminating answer. (If we do not, that may not indicate that we have failed to solve the riddle; there may be no riddle to solve.)

The Game of Tarot

Many interpretations can be—and have been—concocted to accompany the Tarot trumps, just as various moral allegories have been attached to chess and regular playing cards. The thing that sets Tarot apart from other games that have moralized content associated with them is that Tarot actually had immediately recognizable, specific and systematic allegorical content designed into the tokens of play, the pictures on the cards. The presence of subjects such as the Emperor and Pope, Justice, Temperance, Death, the Devil, and the Angel of the Last Resurrection indicate moral content at a glance. The Tarot trumps exhibit a remarkable didactic design, an encyclopedic outline of Christian salvation, in the same *Triumph of Death* tradition as many other medieval and Renaissance works of art. They present this *summa salvationis* via traditional medieval concepts such as the three estates, the Fall of Princes motif, and Revelation's eschatological triumphs over the Devil and death. Deciphering that original moral subject matter, the meaning of the cards and their sequence, is the riddle of Tarot: interpreting the images and their order in such a manner as to make sense of the whole, honoring the "author's message" rather than rewriting it. That is the purpose of this essay.

Apologies in advance for various things that are mentioned in passing, observations assuming a great deal on the part of the reader. I have focused primarily on the design of the trump cycle and its relationships with contemporaneous themes and motifs. However, some details of the discussion presuppose familiarity with the cards themselves, (cf. [The Pictures on the Cards](#)), as well as things that have been written about them by Tarot authors. For those who are familiar with the material, the allusions should provide some useful insights. For those unfamiliar with that background material, the gist of the story should still be visible. Because this essay has grown from a 1,500 word [TarotL post](#) in February of 2002 to about 25,000 words today, it may be useful to begin with an outline. (That's easier than breaking it into smaller linked files.)

The Riddle of Tarot

- The Purpose of a Riddle

The Tarot trumps were invented as a didactic game.

- The Trionfi: A Standardized Set of Subjects

The 22 traditional trump subjects were prototypical.

Composite Works

- Visual Summæ of the Middle Ages

Composite works are characteristic of medieval Christian art

- Structure Conveys Meaning

Deconstructed, any interpretation will be arbitrary.

- Composition and Convergence

Intact, a correct interpretation may be found.

The Order of the Cards

- A Dozen Different Sequences

Tarot's design varied from place to place.

- Grouping within the Sequences

An overall structure was apparent in all these variations.

- Three Regional Types of Sequence

The main differences between the variations were minor.

The Riddle Resolved

- The Three Estates: Social Hierarchy

Moral: **Know your place**

- The Fall of Princes: Circumstances of Life

Moral: **Practice the virtues**

- The Devil and Death: Biblical End Times

Moral: **Trust in God**

- The Solution in Summary

A Word to the Wise

Finally, before beginning this long and rather tedious journey, a word for those who already understand such medieval subject matter—the short version: The Tarot trump cycle is a Triumph of Death. That's it. Everything else is elaboration, and while the trump cycle is wonderfully elaborated, it remains essentially another triumph of death.



Tarot is a Triumph of Death



Many variations on this idea appeared in art and literature over several centuries. The genres in this encompassing family are essentially moral allegories of the Stoic-Christian world view, related to themes of contempt for this fallen world in which Fortune and Death reign over man, themes of *ubi sunt* and *vanitas*, pervasive remembrances of death, the focus on the macabre in forms from the crucified Christ to transi tombs, the



art of dying well, the Four Last Things, etc. The Triumph of Death per se showed some representative of mankind being subject to Death and Death itself triumphed by the resurrection to Judgment. Each element may be illustrated in different ways. Sometimes the representative of man is explicitly named Everyman; sometimes only nobles are shown; sometimes nobles are shown as victims while commoners look on; most characteristically, nobles,



commoners, and religious leaders are all included, representing all estates. The presence of an Everyman or a ranks of man in a work immediately suggests a moral allegory. (The so-called "Mantegna" cosmographic series of images is a famous exception.) Death may be shown in various ways, sometimes in a warning encounter such as the Three Living and the Three Dead, sometimes in an unexpected summoning such as the Dance of Death. The ultimate triumph over Death can also take different forms. It may even be implicit, implied by the Christian context of a fresco on a church wall or a miniature in a book of hours or psalter. A few dozen pictorial works in this family of genres can be seen at the [*Trionfo della Morte*](#) page, along with a list of websites where many other such works can be seen. Here is a small sampling.

Representative *Triumph of Death* Pictures

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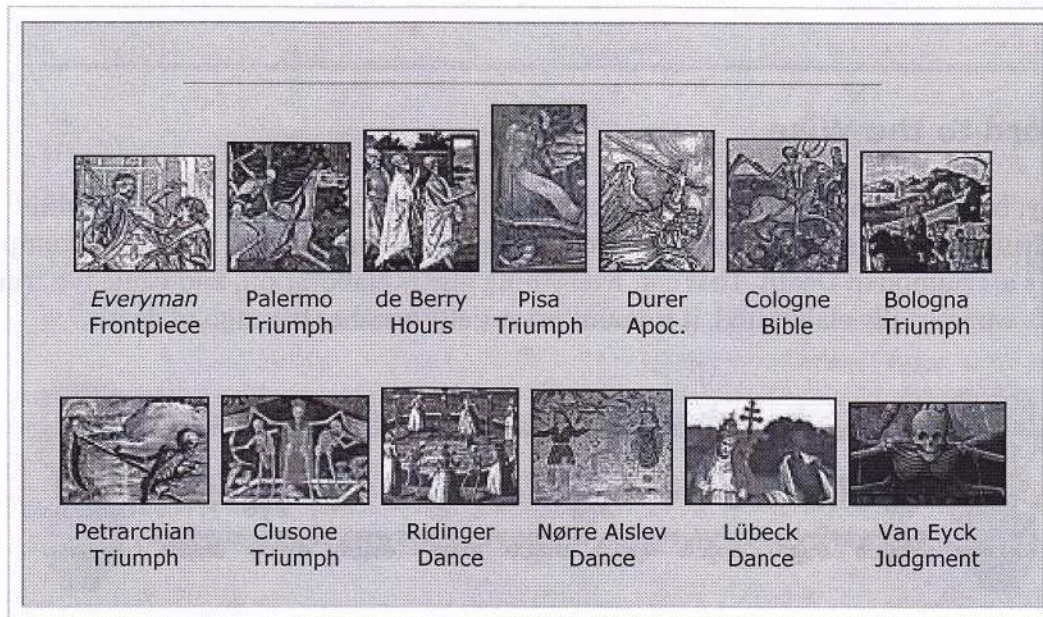


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Representative *Triumph of Death* Pictures



The most striking and influential literary example is Petrarch's *Trionfi*, which Gertrude Moakley took as the source for Tarot's design. (While her conclusion fails to explain the selection and ordering of the trump subjects, there is clearly a family resemblance between the two works. The present interpretation is in some ways a second-generation version of hers.) Boccaccio's encyclopedia of historical biography, *De Casibus*, likewise offers a great litany of examples who show their subjugation to the world of Fortune and Death, whose only hope is virtue and the anticipation of God's world. Morality plays were commonly crafted around a triumph of death, and so on. Okay, maybe it's not *quite* that simple... after all, if it were really that obvious then the meaning would be common knowledge instead of Tarot being considered an enduring enigma. But it is far more of a puzzle today than it would have been a few centuries ago.

The Purpose of a Riddle

"Now we see but a poor reflection, as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am known." (1 Co 12:13, NIV.) That obscured vision is famously translated in the KJV as "through a glass, darkly", but the *Vulgate* said, *per speculum in enigmate*, which might be translated as "in an enigmatic reflection"—as in a riddle. This is how we see Tarot, darkly reflected across five and a half centuries of cultural change. The series of allegorical images in Tarot has defied many attempts to interpret it, and the original meaning is probably more deeply hidden now than ever before, underneath accumulated layers of false leads. The original meaning had been forgotten for centuries, before being buried beneath two centuries of occultist

card players of the time were already acquainted with games played with the regular pack in which some one suit would be designated as trumps, permanently or for a round at a time: we then could not see why anyone should go to the trouble of inventing a new form of pack in which a quite special set of cards were to serve as trumps. But, if we assume that the idea of trumps was not already familiar, the aspect of the matter is quite altered. In that case, the invention of the Tarot pack must have, at the same time, constituted the introduction of the idea of trumps into trick-taking games, one of the great inventions in the history of card play; and the question, 'Why bother with a special set of picture cards when one of the ordinary suits would do?', loses much of its force.

(GT 171.)

Someone had the idea of trumps, a group of cards which would triumph over the regular suits, and the obvious solution was something other than the regular suits. Beyond that, Dummett essentially proved that there is little to be learned about the history of the game of Tarot or even of occult Tarot by studying the iconography of the trumps. He demonstrated that both aspects of Tarot history are largely if not wholly independent of any strong hypothesis about the meaning of the sequence. His book on Tarot history is by far the most comprehensive and substantive ever done, and he makes no appeal to any such theory of meaning. He suggests an alternative, a very weak hypothesis that the trumps were simply memorable and readily differentiated emblems to serve as identifiable ranked subjects at time before numbers were put on cards. The significance of the sequence is rather limited, being merely a sampler of images, perhaps derived in part from triumphal processions. He admits that the images and their sequence *may* have more meaning than a disjointed triumphal sampler, and he even notes that it is a fascinating question. However, he suggests that even if they do have such meaning, it is unlikely to add much to the study of Tarot history.

We can derive some entertainment from asking why that particular selection was made, and whether there is any symbolic meaning to the order in which they were placed; and we may or may not come up with a plausible or illuminating answer. (If we do not, that may not indicate that we have failed to solve the riddle; **there may be no riddle to solve.**) But our answer, though it may throw light on what the original designer of the pack, or the Duke or other noble who ordered it made, had in mind, is unlikely to throw any on the way in which the average fifteenth-century player of the game would have viewed the cards. For him, they were simply a set of picture cards arranged in a particular sequence and having a particular role in the game.

(GT 165.)

While it is certainly true *a priori* that there may be no riddle to solve, it still seems likely that there might be, and that the iconography and sequence might therefore repay study. Many medieval and Renaissance series of images do show cyclic design, an overall composition, even though they may seem puzzling today. This possibility suggests a

fantasy, and several decades of deeply researched and documented dead ends and superficial psychobabble.

Like an old, faded and battered jigsaw puzzle, few things about Tarot are clear, and many pieces do not seem to fit as well as they should. But if we start with the ones that are relatively obvious, assemble as much as we can, and then use what we've learned to help figure out the rest, it can be done. In order to have a reasonably firm foundation, we will begin with the work of Michael Dummett, and his 1980 study of Tarot history, *The Game of Tarot*. Since his book is difficult to find, (and is quoted out of context and misinterpreted by Tarot enthusiasts), I will quote repeatedly from his discussions about early Tarot and especially about the order of the cards, citing it as GT.[A] First, it is important to explicitly acknowledge that the allegorical sequence was added to a regular deck of cards in order to serve as trumps for a card game—that is the purpose of the *trionfi*, the Tarot trumps, in the most basic sense.

In asking for what purpose the Tarot pack was invented, we are asking why the twenty-two additional cards... were added to the regular pack. We shall not gain any enlightenment if we study the iconography of the Tarot pack. That study is, in itself, fascinating, and has absorbed many people, not all of them with occultist leanings; it is, no doubt, worth pursuing for its own sake. But it is highly improbable that, by this means, we shall learn anything relevant to the game played with Tarot cards, or, therefore to the primary purpose for which the pack was originally devised.

(GT 164.)

The fact that the twenty-two allegorical cards were invented primarily to serve as trumps in a trick-taking game is admitted even by many contemporary occultists. (The alternative view, that the trump cycle was primarily a coded compendium of heretical or occult knowledge, and that their "concealment" in a game was necessitated by the dreaded Inquisition, is still very popular.) But why would a special set of cards with allegorical images need to be added to a deck to serve as trumps? Fifteenth-century Italians could just use one of the regular suits for trumps, as is done in most games with trumps. Doesn't the fact that a special set of cards were created imply that there was a purpose beyond the mere playing of a card game? "The role of the triumph cards as permanent trumps in the games played with the Tarot pack simply does not, at first sight, provide an adequate motive for the invention and production of a special pack of cards not readily adapted to the playing of games of other kinds." (GT 170.) So perhaps the trumps *were* flashcards for a secret sect of heretical, Goddess-worshipping Gnostics protecting the bloodline of Jesus and the Magdalene... or some such lively *Da Vinci Code* nonsense. But before getting lost in speculation about a hidden purpose to the trumps, one other fact needs to be noted: trumps of any kind were a new invention.

The puzzle is solved once we drop the assumption that, at the time when Tarot was first devised, the idea of trick-taking games with trumps was already familiar. Our difficulties were caused by taking it for granted that

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second purpose of the Tarot trumps. Certainly the most basic purpose was to serve as trump suit for a card game, but if there is an obscure yet meaningful design to the series of images, it was intended to be understood. That is the purpose of a riddle—to be solved.[B]

In *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, Ronald Decker, Thierry Depaulis, and Michael Dummett put it this way: “The test of whether a coded text has been correctly deciphered is that it allows a coherent message to be read.” (Page 250.) The oblique, metaphorical and partial descriptions (enigmatic reflections of the correct solution) that make up a riddle are intended to be collectively sufficient to unravel its solution; and the solution, once discovered, elucidates the previously cryptic clues. There are many ways to interpret any given Tarot card, just as the individual clues of a riddle suggest many different answers. The correct solution is the one that does the least violence to the individual elements, while making the most sense of them all together. “What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?”, or as the Riddle of the Sphinx is more commonly expressed, what walks on four legs in the morning, two legs during the day, and three legs in the evening? Individually, those elements are very vague and seemingly contradictory. When taken together and given the correct answer, the various metaphorical figures become clear and fit together neatly.

Tarot is not compared to a riddle as mere analogy, but it is in fact a kind of visual riddle, and was originally designed as such. The original version contained multiple layers of systematic meaning, which required very clever design and some conflated iconography. The person who created it was not merely theologically and artistically sophisticated, but extremely ingenious, occasionally ironic, and playful. Although it takes considerable exposition (to a contemporary audience) to explain the solution, once it is seen it makes sense of all the pieces and their combination. The meaning described in this essay is the most generic aspect of that original design, the residual which remained in all the variations that were created by people who didn’t appreciate the subtlety and complexity of the original. Subsequent essays outline the layers of the original design, including both the necessary explanation and some closely-related amplification.

The Trionfi: A Standardized Set of Subjects

Going back to the puzzle metaphor, a primary method for putting a jigsaw puzzle together is starting with the easy stuff: corners, edges, pieces of the same color, and so on. This is an application of Descartes’ Third Rule: “The third, to conduct my thoughts in such order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex; assigning in thought a certain order even to those objects which in their own nature do not stand in a relation of antecedence and sequence.” Work from the known to the unknown, from the obvious to the obscure. What do we know about early Tarot?

Tarot began as an ordinary Italian-suited deck with an added fifth "suit" or group of allegorical triumphs. It was originally known as *carte da trionfi*, cards with triumphs, or trumps. The hierarchical sequence combined with the name, *trionfi*, immediately suggests a connection with triumphal motifs from art and literature, as well as pageants and processions that took place on special occasions.

The triumph had three ancestors: the ancient Roman triumph celebrated to honor a victorious military hero, the medieval religious procession, and the processions of knights traditionally held in connection with jousts and tourneys. The Renaissance interest in the Greek and Roman classics revived interest in the Roman triumph.... In Milan, the religious processions very early took on the dramatic quality of the triumph.... It was the knights' processions which contributed to the triumph the exciting feature of rows of mounted men and footmen, all dressed alike, who marched before each triumphal car. (Gertrude Moakley, *The Tarot Trumps*, 43-44.)

The triumphal motif took many forms: isolated triumphs, such as the Triumph of Death; groups of related triumphs, such as the virtues over their corresponding vices; and sequential triumphs such as that in Petrarch's poem, *I Trionfi*. In Petrarch's sequence of triumphs, he had triumphant Love leading its captives, all of whom along with Love itself were subject to triumphant Chastity. (This was the original design of the poem—a lament on unrequited love.) In a later addition to the poem, Love and Chastity both became subject to Death, but Death was triumphed by Fame. The final triumphs of the poem had Fame succumbing to Time, and Time to Eternity. Although the subjects in the Tarot trumps do not match Petrarch's particular triumphal sequence, the hierarchy does appear to be an allegorical triumph of that general nature, which accounts for the name.

What were the subjects of the *trionfi* in *carte da trionfi*? Moakley believed that there were many variations on the design of *carte da trionfi*, which she referred to generically as *ludus triumphorum*. In that view, the particular version we call Tarot just turned out to be the most successful of the family. Some others have speculated an evolution of Tarot as we know it from a hypothetical earlier design. Based on the earliest surviving cards and documentary evidence, Michael Dummett and other researchers believe that the 22 subjects of the Tarot *trionfi* were essentially fixed from Tarot's inception, independent of whatever other designs may have preceded or followed its invention. Very different card games certainly existed, both before and after Tarot's invention. Some of these may fit into a generic conception of *ludus triumphorum*, but with regard to Tarot itself, there was apparently no initial fiddling around with different numbers of Tarot trumps or different subjects. That came later.

The Tarot pack has many different forms; rather than framing a definition that covers all of them, it is better to describe the archetypal version, which is also the best known. It is archetypal in that every other form that has existed from 1500 to the present day is derived directly or indirectly from it. It may or may not have been the original form. Almost

certainly the earliest Tarot cards surviving to us are those of an incomplete hand-painted set made, perhaps in 1441, for the court of Filippo Maria Visconti, Duke of Milan. The pack of which this is the remnant was certainly constituted differently from our archetypal form; whether it represents an early stage in the evolution, or a mere isolated experiment, the evidence is too scanty to say. But the Tarot pack had certainly been standardized, as regards the number and identity of the cards, by 1450: the archetypal form was that which resulted from that standardisation....

[The trumps] depict a series of standard subjects—the Emperor, the Pope, the Wheel of Fortune, the Hanged Man, the Devil, the Moon, the Sun, the Angel (or Judgement), the World, and so on. In several later forms of the pack, some of these subjects were changed: the Pope and his unexpected associate the Popess were particularly liable to replacement. But when the pack was first standardized, the subjects of the trump cards were standardised, too: they were at first everywhere the same. (*A Wicked Pack of Cards*, 25.)

This suggests a relatively well-defined and generally understood initial design. (Based on the present iconographic study of the Tarot trumps and their meaning, this view is clearly correct.) This is why Dummett has referred to them as “a series of standardised subjects”. Complete redesigns, such as the allegorical Boiardo or classical Sola Busca, are outside this discussion, which focuses on the “archetypal version”. Minchiate and the Sicilian Tarot are quite variant, but still reminiscent of what Decker et al. call archetypal Tarot, as are the almost-mainstream designs like Bolognese Tarot or Vievil’s deck. Likewise, the non-Tarot designs which have been argued to be part of the generic *ludus triumphorum* conception of *trionfi* are not discussed here.

There were iconographic variations from deck to deck, but most of them left the basic, underlying subjects readily identifiable. Conflation of various literary subjects with the Tarot subjects was common, including repeated examples of classical subjects being blended with the standard trumps. Some of the most striking variations were in the hand-painted decks of the nobility. Gertrude Moakley identified a large number of likely references blended into a particular hand-painted deck, including numerous specific emblems of the Visconti and Sforza families, references to Carnival/Lent processions, and to Petrarch’s *I Trionfi*. The Visconti-Sforza Hermit, for example, was shown as an allegory of Time, and the Chariot with a female driver was perhaps an allusion to Chastity. Fortitude suggests not the abstract allegory of a woman, (with a lion or broken column), but the historical representative, “Hercules fighting [the Nemean] lion with a club.” And so on.

Some other early examples of iconographic conflation include the figure on the World card of the so-called Charles VI deck, who wore the polygonal halo of the Moral Virtues in that deck, thereby suggesting the “missing virtue” of Prudence. One deck shows the fight between Orlando and Rodomond, from *Orlando Furioso*, on card XVI. James

Revak has suggested that the Chariot from the Vieil deck is drawn by locusts from Revelation 9:7-9, and has found iconographic cognates. The Death card was shown as a skeletal Cardinal, with his red cloak and broad-brimmed hat, 15 tassels on either side, holding a scythe. And so on. Iconographic conflation was common and extremely varied, but the underlying subjects usually remained identifiable, hence the observation that the 22 subjects formed a standardized set from the beginning.

The most extreme variation between standard pattern decks was in the World card. In the Tarot de Marseille pattern, Christ is shown in a mandorla surrounded by the emblems of the Evangelists as described in Rev 5:5-6. (The figure is feminine or androgynous, perhaps as implied by Mt. 22:30; or perhaps suggesting *Anima Christi*, *Anima Mundi*; or perhaps *Shekinah*—the Glory of God—which lights the resurrected world, with the Lamb as its lamp. (Rev 21:23.) The figure also displays attributes of the Passion, as described in Mt 27:28-29.) In other decks, however, the World showed the “new heaven and new earth”, symbolizing the New Jerusalem of Revelation’s Chapter 21. In either case, whether showing the new world or Christ as the light of the new world, the highest triumph was something perfectly appropriate for that role in an eschatological series of Christian triumphs: the world without end, the *saeculum saeculorum*, the ultimate triumph of eternity. In other words, even the most dramatic variation was actually not that extreme, but merely the substitution of one symbol of Christ’s ultimate triumph for another.

The subjects of the trumps are reviewed in some detail in The Pictures on the Cards. Here we will only note their names and the fact that they reflect three different kinds of subject matter. That will be discussed in detail below, but the basic idea is that figures ranging from low lifes (such as the Fool and Mountebank) to the Emperor and Pope were commonly used to represent a social hierarchy; allegorical subjects such as Love, Death, the Wheel of Fortune, and the Moral Virtues reflected critical circumstances and moral habits of life; subjects such as the Devil, fire and giant hail from heaven (shown on the Tower), the Moon, Sun, the Angel of Resurrection, and New Jerusalem or Christ Triumphant (shown on the World) represented details from Christian eschatology. This kind of composite design was typical of didactic Christian art in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Visual Summæ of the Middle Ages

Didactic art in the Middle Ages was a commonplace, a pervasive reality. It was generally associated with the subject matter people truly needed to know about, religion. Pope Gregory the Great stated in the sixth century that pictures were the books of the common man, (*pictura est laicorum literatura*), and painting was sometimes classified under Rhetoric among the Liberal Arts. This understanding of the function of art as didactic illustration was repeated throughout the Middle Ages, with the twelfth-century theologian Peter Comestor being among the famously quoted examples: "The paintings of the churches are in place of books to the uneducated", *quasi libri laicorum*. (Catholic Encyclopedia.) In another example, "the statutes of the painter's guild in Siena stated outright that their task was 'the expositions of sacred writ to the ignorant who know not how to read'." (Ross King, *Michelangelo & the Pope's Ceiling*.)

Religious services themselves constituted lessons within this enveloping milieu: Rituals and sermons were the instruction which took place within this elaborated educational and inspirational setting. And the liturgy gave rise to drama, and blended with festivals and feasts and pageants and assorted public processions. History and Pagan myth were incorporated, becoming Christian allegory and thereby fitting neatly into the didactic environment. The art itself reinforced and echoed the priest's lesson, recalling the sermon without a word. These visual presentations kept the course outline (or significant parts of it) on permanent display. Naturally, such didactic art was most commonly exhibited by the Church itself, in and on the churches. The exterior of the building including every architectural element, the windows and doors, interior walls, ceilings, floors and furnishings were all canvas for this art. Outside the churches, didactic exposition was the primary function of some monumental works, and a subsidiary purpose of clock towers, public fountains, and the like. Characteristically, the more elaborate of such works were encyclopedic in design.

- Composite, orchestrating different types of subject matter

This is the primary characteristic of the encyclopedic sensibility.

- Diverse material related to a central design
- Mixing historical, biblical, pagan, allegorical, etc.
- Schematic summary
- Analytical organization
- Easily grasped and remembered—medieval Cliff's Notes

- Limited in scope or aspect

Each such work was only part of the universal body of knowledge.

- Comprehensive summary within those limits
- Implicitly connected to the universe beyond those limits

- Compilation rather than a wholly new work

- Moralized content—every picture tells a moral story

The Standard Tarot Trump Subjects		
Social Hierarchy	Allegories of Life	Biblical End Times
The Fool	Love	The Devil
The Mountebank	The Chariot	The Tower
The Popess	Justice	The Star
The Empress	Time	The Moon
The Emperor	The Wheel of Fortune	The Sun
The Pope	Fortitude	The Angel
	The Hanged Man	The World
	Death	
	Temperance	

Chapter IV of Jean Seznec's 1940 book, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, is titled "The Encyclopedic Tradition". It discusses such schematic summaries and gives examples of the different functions they might serve. "Sometimes current decorative themes are used with no sign of any organic arrangement which might indicate a carefully thought-out program. Sometimes, on the other hand, everything reveals the artist's subservience to the order imposed by the mind." The designs on the **Great Fountain of Perugia**, for example, summarize the identity (i.e., history and relationships) of that city, as seen by the designers. "On the Fontana Maggiore in Perugia, allegories of the Months and the Sciences, in combination with scenes from Genesis, make up a history of the world. But local traditions also play their part in this history. In one of the bas-reliefs, Romulus and Remus are a reminder of the fabulous beginnings in Rome, mother of civilization. The statuettes of the upper basin recall the origins of Augusta Perusia herself, and these origins are, in their turn, mythological: the hero Aulestes, legendary king of Etruria, progenitor of the race and founder of the city, stands near the saints Herculani and Lawrence, who later awakened it to the Christian life." Other figures personify Lake Trasimene and the Chiusi, (Perugia's fishery and granary), the lion of the Guelphs and the gryphon of Perugia, and so on. This is indeed a visual summa, a schematic encyclopedia; but specifically it is a synopsis of Perugia and her place in the world.

Another example discussed by Seznec is "**Mantegna's Tarocchi**", a well-known series of fifty figures in five groups, created a half-century after Tarot. Arthur M. Hind aptly titled this series, *The Governance of the World*, and John Shephard explained in detail the cosmographic design of the five groupings. The first four decades each represented a hierarchy associated with one of the four elements of the sub-lunar world, (earth, water, air, and fire), while the fifth decade contained a conventional celestial hierarchy. This is also—most obviously—a visual summa; but specifically it is an encyclopedia of the cosmos: an exceptionally elaborate cosmograph, into which a ranks of man, the Muses, the Liberal Arts, and the seven Cardinal Virtues have been neatly and uniquely integrated.

The most common examples of these schematic summaries were comprised of biblical subjects. (Seznec, of course, largely ignores these examples of visual summae, as his topic is the use of Pagan motifs.) Among the most typical subjects were scenes from Genesis and Revelation, scenes from the life of Jesus, and Old Testament scenes that foreshadowed the life of Jesus. Something like the **ceiling of the Sistine Chapel** is precisely such a schematic yet comprehensive survey of a limited subject area. In that particular case, the subject area is the story leading up to the Incarnation: the Creation and Fall, Old Testament types of Jesus, prophets and sibyls who foresaw Jesus, and the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham. Again we see different types of subject matter orchestrated into a unified conception. Religious works might include not only references to biblical stories, but also commonly referenced was the *Golden Legend*, (c. 1260), a book of 182 chapters relating the lives of the saints and stories of feast days, arranged according to the liturgical year.

An altarpiece **Triumph of St. Thomas**, by Francesco Traini, circa 1323 (probably commemorating Thomas' canonization) shows him receiving wisdom (in the form of

proffered books) from God, from the Evangelists, and from classical philosophers, and conveying it through his own writings (books on his lap) to both the faithful and to potential converts. A far more elaborate fresco showing the **Triumph of St. Thomas** was painted by Andrea di Bonaiuto (Andrea da Firenze), 1365-68. (A larger image and very detailed description are presented by Michael and Aimee Natal.)

Secular works, like **The Allegory of Good Government** (c.1340) by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, also showed composite design. The composition of this fresco is instructive, as it has three horizontal groupings of figures, each a different type of subject matter. In the foreground, contemporary Sienese political figures are represented. On a raised platform behind them are two groups of allegorical figures. On the right are the City of Siena, the four Cardinal Virtues, Peace and Magnanimity. Above these figures are angelic figures of the Theological Virtues, virtues infused by God and with Him as their object. On the left Justice and Wisdom are shown in a distinct vignette which is joined to the figures on the right by a procession of councillors. Tarot is also designed in three realms of figures, each of a different ontological type: They range from representatives of social status, through conventional allegory such as Love, Fortune, and Death, and finally an eschatological realm.

Of course, any and all such subjects could be used in simple and obvious designs, but they were frequently combined into these complex and subtle groupings. Often the different types of subject matter were associated primarily by number rather than any obvious substantive relationship. Seznec describes a famous example illustrating the **Practica musice** by Franchini Gafurri. The eight planetary spheres were associated with eight Muses (while Thalia, following indications of Martianus Capella, was associated with earth and the sub-lunar elements), with the eight musical modes and the seven tones and semi-tones between, as aspects of a unified and harmonious cosmos.

An illustration of Job's children from the twelfth-century **Floreffe Bible** unites several spheres of interpretation. Typologically, the seven sons of Job are related to the twelve apostles ($3+4=7$ and $3 \times 4=12$), while morally they are associated with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Seven virtues which derive from these gifts (not the conventional seven Cardinal Virtues) are also shown, as are the three Theological Virtues, the latter associated with Job's three daughters. Job, a type of Christ, prays for God's mercy on his children, as Christ also pleads for them, and so on. (Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Mediaeval Art*.)

Another complex example from Seznec is the **ceiling by Girolamo Mocetto**, a design whose affinities, contrasts, and symmetric layout were clearly intended to convey a message, to summarize some subject, yet which is quite obscure today. (Table from Seznec, page 130.)

Ceiling Design by Girolamo Mocetto				
Mars	Rape of Europa	Prudence	Narcissus	Saturn
Lucretia	Classical triumph	David	Classical triumph	Judith
Temperance	Judgment of Solomon	Fortitude	Justice of Trajan	Justice
Philosopher (Aristotle?)	Triumph of Fame	Astronomer (Ptolemy?)	Triumph of Love	Geometer (Euclid?)
Diana	Myrrha and Adonis	Hope	Mucius Scaevola	Mercury

Abstractly considered, composite designs could be based on any number of organizing principles and combinations thereof. Number, time, place, and ranking were among the most common such principles. Many composite designs appear to be based on little more than a similar number of elements in the different subjects, and they take many forms, often in conjunction with other organizing principles. Organization based on time generally results in calendars and narratives; organization based on place results in maps; and organization based on rank results in hierarchies, and these three principles were used for visual presentations such as illustrated calendars, annotated maps, and various ladder motifs. While a calendar per se is not a composite work, an almanac is. They commonly combined astronomical and astrological information, labors of the months, religious content, and other subject matter related to the calendar itself. These are encyclopedic treatments of time. Narratives which were sometimes turned into composite works included the life of Christ, which was turned into the liturgical year, and the Passion of Christ, which was turned into the liturgical hours of the day. Illustrations of either of these tended to have composite designs. Then there were elaborate maps of the world (such as the *Hereford Mappa Mundi* or the *Catalan Atlas*). These were not only spatially comprehensive but also moralized in their design and content, (as was virtually everything), and thus they were also composite works. The best examples of moralized designs, naturally, were based primarily on ranking. Many things were ranked, from social hierarchies and ladders of virtues to choirs of angels, sometimes in visual form, and analogies between such designs led to composite designs. The best example of a visual summa based on ranking is the Ptolemaic cosmograph known as the Mantegna Tarocchi, mentioned above. In addition to the ranked spheres of a typical cosmograph, four analogous hierarchies were ranked below them.

As a final example of composite works, consider Hans Holbein's famous **Dance of Death**. The traditional Dance of Death motif showed the dead leading away living persons. The individuals came from all ranks of society, thus illustrating that we all die. This was a simple allegory, with the dead personifying Death. (These are also the best and most common examples of the Ranks of Man motif, seen in the Tarot trump cards.) Holbein, however, put the Dance in a larger context. In his design, we first see how death obtained dominion over man, with images from Genesis, and at the conclusion of the sequence we see how death will be overcome, with Christ sitting in

judgment over the resurrected dead, an image taken from Revelation. This larger biblical context of death was implicit in all the various medieval motifs of death, which were profoundly Christian *memento mori*, but in Holbein it was made explicit. This makes Holbein's Dance of Death another composite work and an encyclopedic summary of the subject of death, its origin, its universal influence, and its eschatological resolution in the resurrection of the dead and Christ's judgment.

Comedy and Tragedy

Dramatically, comedy is defined by its "happy ending", a narrative arc which triumphs over adverse circumstance, while tragedy is defined by its "tragic ending", a narrative arc in which catastrophe and death overwhelms earlier triumphs. The conventional Dance of Death is tragic, as is typical of Christian narratives restricted to this world. The fallen world is inherently tragic, hence the many medieval variations on motifs of Death, *ubi sunt*, and *Contemptu Mundi*.

"The Christian European spirit which one may call Gothic is strongly bent upon concluding tragedy with death and giving it a final seal of authenticity in death. In its religious Contempt of the World it dwells upon the ills of mankind as having their origin in the Garden of Eden with the sin of Adam. Chief among these ills, that toward which the others all tend, is the death of the body. Hence, death becomes for the Gothic mind a primary symbol of the imperfection in mortal life. It is thought of as a necessary culmination of tragic adventure. In a sense all Gothic tragedy, in the hands of Boccaccio and in the hands of his successors, is a Dance of Death."

Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*

Holbein's version, however, has a larger scope which includes the origin of the tragic circumstance in the Fall, and the triumph over that tragedy in the Last Judgment, Christ's eschatological victory over Death. A famous Triumph of Death fresco cycle dating from the mid 1300s, in the Camposanto, Pisa, included a similar diversity of figures in life. To convey the triumph of death, they come upon rotting corpses in open coffins. Like Holbein's *Dance of Death* (and Tarot) there was an eschatological conclusion to the cycle, a "happy ending". (*Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art*, 596.) Different designs conveyed the same message of mortality and resurrection to judgment. Such a dramatic comedy will be seen in the narrative arc of Tarot as well—comedy not in the farcical sense of a TV sitcom, but in the sense of a *Divine Comedy*. Dante wrote:

The title of the book is: Begins the Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Florentine in birth, not in custom. In order to understand you need to know that comedy comes from komos "village" and oda, which means "song", whence comedy sort of means "country song". And comedy is sort of a kind of poetic narration, different from all others. It differs, therefore, from the tragedy, in matter by the fact that tragedy in the beginning is admirable and quiet, in the end or final exit it is smelly and horrible; and it gets its name because of this from tragos, which means "goat", and oda, sort of like "goat-song", that is, smelly like a goat, as can be seen in Seneca's tragedies. But comedy begins with harshness in some thing, whereas its matter ends in a good way, as can be seen by Terence in his comedies. And thus letter writers are accustomed to say in their salutations in the place of an address "a tragic beginning, a comical end". They differ also in the way of speaking: the tragedy is elevated and sublime, the comedy loose and humble, as Horace tells us in his *Poetria*, where he permits now and again comic writers to speak like tragedists and also vice versa.

From the *Letter to Can Grande*, translated by James Marchand.

These visual summae were commonplace and the Tarot trump cycle is yet another example. The question becomes, how do we read such a work? We have twenty-two

images that presumably carried a meaning significant to the time and place of its invention, or at least that was meaningful to its designer. To modern eyes, however, they are pieces of a puzzle.

Structure Conveys Meaning

Our first resolution must be to keep the puzzle intact. Rosamond Tuve, in a chapter titled "Imposed Allegory" (*Allegorical Imagery*, 1966), offers the following two guidelines to avoid imposing unintended allegorical content on a work.

This then is the first safeguarding principle: if large portions of a work have to be covered with blotting paper while we read our meaning in what is left, we are abusing rather than using the images.
(AI 234.)

We arrive at a second principle: the principal drift governs the meanings attributable to the incidents born upon the stream; the latter cannot take their own moral direction as they choose. If we ignore the stream's main direction of flow, and embark on incidents which travel counter to or unrelated to it, arriving at special separable meanings for such incidents, we shall presently drown farcically, amid the laughter of the characters, who sit on the bank well protected by the natures the author gave them, only waiting for the chance to push us in.
(AI 235.)

The entire work must be taken into account, and the parts must fit the whole. A corollary is that the obscure or ambiguous elements must be conformed to mesh with the obvious ones, rather than selecting a preferred interpretation for an ambiguous aspect and then bludgeoning conventional meanings elsewhere to force them into the preconceived form. Context counts, and the entirety of the work, its composition as a whole, is the primary context for each element. A pictorial work such as the trump cycle is inevitably going to be schematic at best. Each image is, in fact, going to be to some degree out of its larger context. However, the surrounding composition should provide enough context to determine the significance of each piece, just as the shape and colors of each jigsaw puzzle piece connect it to the surrounding pieces. Because the pictorial work is schematic, each element should be essential in some manner. If a source work is being compared to the trump cycle, each supposed element of the comparison should be highly significant to both works—essential elements should have been abstracted from the source, so as to convey the essential meaning. If one must scour the alleged source for incidental elements to mindlessly match to the trump cycle, then it is obvious that the meaning is different, and the "source" is probably not even an "influence".

We can create as many arbitrary interpretations we wish from the images taken out of context, but we cannot even seriously pretend that such meaning is not being imposed

upon the cards rather than being presented by them. That approach has been employed over and over again by generations of Tarot enthusiasts. Currently it is justified by the methodologies of Postmodern academia (relying on the universal solvent termed deconstruction) and by psychological speculations assuming the cards to be universal symbols ("archetypal images") susceptible to intuitive interpretation, i.e., naive projection. In fact, the images are not universal symbols, but rather the conventions of a particular culture: late-medieval Roman Catholic Italy. Taking the images out of their sequential context, or worse yet, out of their cultural context, is guaranteed to be a productive approach—too productive. Without those contextual constraints, there is no end to the interpretations that may be generated. The process is endlessly divergent, with every critic or exegete arriving at their own unique vision. It is like interpreting a jigsaw puzzle piece by piece, never attempting to assemble them into an overall picture.

Solving a jigsaw puzzle is a matter of fitting the pieces *together* correctly. Likewise, solving a riddle, making sense of its enigmatic reflections of the correct answer, requires looking at the conceivable answers to a given clue *in the light of the other clues* given. Each hint constrains the acceptable answers for the others. Holding the several constraints in mind while generating and considering alternative solutions is required. Context constrains the otherwise endless possibilities—context counts. The primary constraint in the riddle of Tarot is the sequence itself, and considering each card in the context of the entire series.

Not all those who have sought to decode the symbolism of the Tarot pack have been occultists; some have been serious scholars, well versed in the iconography of later mediaeval and early Renaissance art. One W.M. Seabury wrote a book to prove that the symbolism of the pack was based upon Dante; Miss Gertrude Moakley, in her fine book about the Visconti-Sforza pack, advanced an interpretation of the pack, supported by much evidence from Italian art and literature; Mr. Ronald Decker has engaged in complicated speculations, linking the pack to the astrology of the time. I am not going to advance another such theory. I do not even want to take a stand about the theories that have been advanced.[C] The question is whether a theory is needed at all. I do not mean to deny that some of the subjects, or some of the details of their conventional representation, may have had a symbolic significance obvious to fifteenth-century Italians, or, at least, to educated ones, that escapes us and may be revealed by patient research; that is very likely to be the case. But **the question is whether the sequence as a sequence has any special symbolic meaning.** I am inclined to think that it did not: to think, that is, that those who originally designed the Tarot pack were doing the equivalent, for their day, of those who later selected a sequence of animal pictures to adorn the trump cards of the new French-suited pack. They wanted to design a new kind of pack with an additional set of twenty-one picture cards that would play a special, indeed a quite new, role in the game; so they selected for those cards a number of subjects, most of them entirely familiar, that would naturally come to the mind of someone at a fifteenth-

century Italian court. It is rather a random selection: we might have expected all seven principal virtues, rather than just the three we find—and, of course, we do find all seven in the Minchiate pack, and they were probably present also in the Visconti di Modrone pack. With the Sun and Moon we might have expected the other five planets, instead of just a star; with the Pope and the Emperor, we might have expected other ranks and degrees. But of course, in a pack of cards what is essential is that each card may be instantly identified; so one does not want a large number of rather similar figures, especially before it occurred to anyone to put numerals on the trump cards for ease of identification. Certainly most of the subjects on the Tarot trumps are completely standard ones in mediaeval and Renaissance art; there seems no need of any special hypothesis to explain them. Whatever may be the truth about those who first designed the Tarot pack, the inventors of the Minchiate pack surely approached their task in the spirit I have suggested: they wanted twenty additional subjects, and they choose ones which it was natural for men of the sixteenth century to think of—the four elements, the remaining virtues, the signs of the Zodiac—and inserted them *en bloc* in a convenient place. I do not think that anyone has suggested that there is any hidden significance in the sequence of Minchiate Trumps.

That is my opinion; but I do not want to insist on it. It may be that those who first devised the Tarot pack had a special purpose in mind in selecting those particular subjects and in arranging them in the order that they did: perhaps they then spelled out, to those capable of reading them, some satirical or symbolic message. If so, it is apparent that, at least by the sixteenth century, the capacity to read this message had been lost. There are many references to *tarocchi* in sixteenth-century Italian literature, in which their symbolic potentialities were exploited, but always in an obvious way: no hint survives that any more arcane meaning was associated with them.
(GT 387-8.)

The search for a hidden meaning may be a unicorn hunt; but if there is a meaning to be found, only a correct basis of fact will lead us to it. **The hidden meaning, if any, lies in the sequential arrangement of the trump cards....**
(GT 388.)

This is the essential insight, the key to assembling the puzzle and understanding the riddle: the required constraints are imposed by the *sequence* of the cards. Each card must be considered in the context of the others, and the context of the ordered sequence. Dummett did all the essential groundwork, laying the foundation in historical fact, and analyzing the sequence in sufficient detail to undergird our speculative superstructure.

Composition and Convergence

Focusing on sequential context as an essential element of a card's meaning is a novel approach. Although Dummett pointed toward this essential element back in 1980, no one has followed up on his lead. Many authors—and as Dummett noted, not all of them occultists—have offered interpretations of the meaning of the Tarot trumps. Without exception, they have either ignored the face value meanings of the cards (that is, the Pope represents the pope, Justice is the personified allegory of justice, etc.) or they have paid scant attention to the sequential aspect of the series. The most common approaches either attached a preconceived system of associations to the trumps, ala the early occultists, or allowed all manner of nearly random associations, as is common today. Attending to the more obvious possible meanings on the one hand, while looking for a systematic design to the series on the other, has never been seriously attempted. The Cabalistic and astrological systems of the early occultists are now generally conceded to be arbitrary. However, the contemporary tendency toward free association, assuming no coherent meaning to the sequence per se, has knowledgeable and articulate defenders, and is consistent with attitudes from Postmodern academia. Therefore, a few more words need to be said in response to that approach, and in defense of the quest for a coherent meaning behind the trump sequence.

Simply finding plausible meanings for the Tarot images individually, taken out of their sequential context, has **zero explanatory value**. The thing sought after is the specific subject matter that explains the work—that is the iconographic grail. In the case of the Tarot trumps, it is the didactic content which explains the images and their sequence. To deconstruct the work, taking the cards out of context and examining them in isolation (or in a revisioned context) may be an heuristically useful exploratory approach. To consider what meaning a typical fifteenth-century card player, an educated noble, or even a Renaissance magus might have associated with a given image or group of cards may be intriguing to some people. However, such methodologies are inherently divergent, producing endless alternatives but no explanation. Only the author's original meaning, i.e., the intended subject matter of the work, can explain the work, and the clues and constraints needed to discover that meaning are in the sequential context.

For example, to understand why there is a bird on TdM's Star card, we must do more than simply free-associate about bird symbolism in general, or expand at length on a preferred contemporaneous analog. We must use the context to constrain and direct our selection: we must think critically about the possible alternatives, and our standards of criticism come primarily from the context. We want to know why the bird is on a bush, on that card, related to the other symbolism present on the card, and in that place in the sequence, along with the meaning of the rest of the images and their sequence. Of all the possible interpretations, which one *makes sense* of the image, and of the series as a whole?

Such an approach is far more challenging than unconstrained exploration of endless hypothetical associations and vague analogies. However, it holds out the hope of finding an actual explanation, correctly identifying the subject matter of the cycle, because the contextual constraints render the process convergent. Moreover, the method turns out to be amazingly successful—Tarot not only makes sense, but is a magnificent work, wonderfully illustrating many of the characteristic values, attitudes, and beliefs of late-medieval Christianity. The reason why context is vital (necessary) and so successful (sufficient) in deciphering the otherwise obscure trump cycle is because medieval art was designed to be read contextually.

(It is probably necessary to note that when I refer to “reading contextually” I do NOT mean in the Postmodern sense of ignoring the original context and imposing a neo-Marxist framework—nor feminist, gay, green, vegan, afrocentric, indigenous peoples, etc. ad nauseum, either. Contextualizing something originally meant to consider it within the circumstances of its origin, rather than in isolation. Today it more commonly means looking at something from the deeply biased perspective of a particular identity group or political agenda. Tarot has traditionally been contextualized in the Postmodern sense, being interpreted within the narrow, peculiar, anachronistic confines of Cabala, astrology, magic, mysticism, and divination. Since the 1970s, Jungian psychology has been the primary context, and since the 1980s Gnosticism and the *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* mythos have been key secondary contexts. In this essay however, the context of a Tarot symbol is the rest of the image in which it appears, the card’s historically documented name, the rest of the images and their sequence in that locale, and the historical milieu in which that deck was created, along with the documented history of Tarot and occult Tarot as developed by Michael Dummett and others.)

A Dozen Different Sequences

Above, Dummett was quoted a bit misleadingly, emphasizing a particular part of his statement. Now we need to revisit his statement, highlighting the previously omitted conclusion. “The search for a hidden meaning may be a unicorn hunt; but if there is a meaning to be found, only a correct basis of fact will lead us to it. The hidden meaning, if any, lies in the sequential arrangement of the trump cards; and therefore, if it is to be uncovered, we must know what, originally, that arrangement was.” If this were the case, we would have a serious difficulty. Dummett identifies a dozen different early orderings of the cards, based on a variety of sources.

There are three types of source that we have for the different orderings of the trumps observed by Italian card players. First, there are the three variant types of pack, the Tarocco Bolognese, the Tarocco Siciliano, and the Minchiate pack. The Minchiate pack has, of course, twenty additional trumps: but since these were inserted en bloc at a certain point in the sequence of standard trump subjects, we can remove them and study the resulting order in reasonable confidence that it represents an order

observed for the trumps of the 78-card pack at the time the Minchiate pack was invented. Second, there are the early packs that survive to us.... Finally, there are literary sources.
(GT 389.)

Of the orders which we known in complete detail, only two agree exactly.... All the rest have at least minor differences between them. ... we thus have eleven distinct orders, all differing from the Tarot de Marseille order....
(GT 396.)

Based on the fragmentary historical evidence, several of those orders are plausible candidates for being the original, but in fact, there is no guarantee that the original sequence even survived. Fortunately, Dummett was mistaken. We do *not* need to know what the original order was to pursue such studies. We can look at what the various early orders have in common, and attempt a generic iconographic interpretation consistent with all of them, employing additional explanations of the specific differences. Such a study might suggest to us a meaning that was commonly recognized in the fifteenth century, perhaps even by the people who were simply playing the game, but certainly by the individuals who created the various orderings. This is the approach of the present essay.

A second possibility is to study all of the variations and attempt to decipher each separately, looking for the one that shows the best evidence of integrated design. **Rather than knowledge of the original order being a prerequisite for such a unicorn hunt, it may be the unicorn itself.** Such a study might find that one particular sequence, and its corresponding iconography, appears exceptionally well designed, while the others are most easily explained as derivatives which, while making intelligible changes, nonetheless failed to maintain much of the overall meaning and coherence. (Such an approach is analogous to that of textual criticism, by which biblical scholars attempt to reconstruct the evolution of texts.) If such an approach proved successful, then we might actually learn something with important implications for the origin of Tarot, we might indeed gain some enlightenment by studying the iconography. Some discussion of that quest for the original design, the Ur Tarot, is included in this essay, but it is detailed elsewhere.

Typically in contemporary Tarot interpretations, sequence is given little attention. The card images are interpreted with only a vague reference to their place in the Tarot trump hierarchy. Sometimes the hierarchy is violated outrageously. A striking example is the mindless repetition of the early occultist blunder in which the lowly Tarot Empress represents the Virgin Mary, as Queen of Heaven. Context conveys meaning, and the trumps are a hierarchical composition. Each card's place in the hierarchy is its most fundamental significance for the game, and must be taken into account by any interpretation pretending to historical significance. That hierarchical status is essential to both their allegorical meaning and their function in the game. In this essay, an interpretation is developed which explains the hierarchical design in specific, card-by-

card detail. The dozen variations in sequence are usually shrugged off with some vague hand-waving comments about failed attempts to “Christianize” the imaginary Pagan, heretical, or occult original design. Interpretations which are little more than arbitrary narratives in the first place are easily modified to take any variation into account, since it is merely a kind of free association. More than that is required here. Because the present interpretation maintains that a coherent and systematic design was created, and that intelligible changes were made, many things are required that are not usually attempted. The overall design, apparent in all the variations, needs to be explained as making sense in each case. One version (existing or hypothetical) needs to be postulated as the original design, and the various others explained as intelligible variations.

As in so many areas, Dummett has again done much of the hardest work. Most of the more extreme later variations in subject matter were researched and documented in *The Game of Tarot*. Many of the most puzzling aspects of variant decks such as Minchiate, Bolognese, and Sicilian decks were explained satisfactorily. The remaining challenge is to discern the underlying design, the archetypal design from which those variants derived. That is the subject here.

Grouping within the Sequence

First we need to recognize certain commonalties within the dozen different orderings. Twelve different orderings of the trumps to study sounds like a formidable first step. However, they share a common design, and this was discovered and outlined in some detail—again, by Dummett. Although his analysis of the sequence into three groups of cards was published a quarter of a century ago, no one has followed up on it with a corresponding iconographic study. No doubt in part because of Dummett’s antipathy toward occultist fictions, no one in the Tarot “community” has even attempted to use Dummett’s historical work as a basis for interpreting early Tarot.

When we look closely at the various orders, we find that there was far from being total chaos. A first impression is of a good deal of regularity which, however, is hard to specify. Now the cards which wander most unrestrainedly within the sequence, from one ordering to another, are the three Virtues. If we remove these three cards, and consider the sequence formed by the remaining eighteen trump cards, it becomes very easy to state those features of their arrangement which remain constant in all the orderings. Ignoring the Virtues, we can say that the sequence of the remaining trumps falls into three distinct segments, an initial one, a middle one, and a final one, all variation occurring only within these different segments.

(GT 398.)

This is a crucial finding. In 1985, Dummett wrote "Tracing the Tarot", an article in the periodical FMR, which correctly identified the three groups. (In his earlier analysis presented in *The Game of Tarot*, Dummett included Death in the third group.)

The first group consists of the *Bagatto* (the "trifle", aka Mountebank, Juggler, or Magician) and the four "papal and imperial cards". The Fool is not included in most early lists of the trumps, it is generally not numbered, and it has a unique role in the game. However, as part of the allegorical design of the series, its place as the lowest of the low is obvious, and essential to the design. The Fool considered as an allegorical figure belongs in this group, and these six cards form a social hierarchy, a "ranks of man" design, showing two representatives from each of the "three estates" of medieval society. In every ordering of the Tarot sequence, the Mountebank is the lowest of the trumps and the Pope is the highest. This clearly suggests a rather simple, very intelligible design is present.

"The next group of cards could be described as representing conditions of human life: love; the cardinal virtues of Temperance, Fortitude..., and Justice; the triumphal car; the wheel of fortune; the card now known as the hermit; the hanged man; and death." These images are allegory properly so-called, rather than the representatives of social rank in the first section. They reflect a "conditions of man" design which, like social ranking, formed a well-known organizing principle in didactic art. The Moral Virtues, Love, Death, and the Wheel of Fortune are among the most common allegories of the era.

"The final sequence represents spiritual and celestial powers; the devil, the tower, the star, the moon, the sun, the world, and the angel. The angel is the angel of the Last Judgment." These images are related to Christian eschatology, and although they are not the most conventional representations, they derive from chapters 20 and 21 of Revelation, and tell the central story of Christ's triumphs over the Devil (the lowest card of the section) and Death (via an image of resurrection.)

Iconographic analysis results in the same three groups as Dummett's analysis of historical sequences, and adds meaning to the structure, making sense of the design. Dummett himself couldn't resist characterizing the groups by their subject matter, even though his analysis was primarily based on sequence rather than iconography. However, even looking at the sequential analysis alone, if we cut the deck properly, analyze the sequence correctly, we can see these striking commonalties across the dozen historical orders. The cards ranked below the Pope were never moved above that card, and the cards above the Devil were never moved below. None of the changes that were made in Tarot's assorted revisionings disturbed the larger design, division of the sequence into three blocks or segments, corresponding to three types of subject matter. (Dummett's analysis excluded the three Moral Virtues, because they seemed to confuse things. The three virtues were the cards most widely varied in their positions. They don't need to be excluded, merely explained within each sequence.)

The term "Three Worlds" is appropriate to identify this overall design, and along with the names of the three Realms below, is taken from John Shephard's 1985 book, *Cosmos*

in Miniature. Shephard came very close to recognizing the macro structure of Tarot. (Arthur Edward Waite had also come close, some sixty years before Shephard.) Although he intuitively grasped this basic division of the Tarot trumps into three types of subject matter, Shephard unfortunately insisted on an arbitrary septenary division of the sequence. (This was part of his attempt to explain Tarot as based on a complex Children of the Planets astrological design.) He subdivided the composition into seven-card groupings instead of following either the iconographic typology or the structure as revealed by the historical orderings. Thus, the spheres of existence *as he divided the sequence* are useless for discussing either the iconography or the historical orderings. His choice of terminology, however, was excellent. It turns out that iconography confirms Dummett's analysis of the orderings into three segments, and also Shephard's intuitive assessment of the three types of subject matter and his choice of terminology. In the tabular presentation below, each table corresponds to one of the three worlds.

Three Regional Types of Sequence

Second, we need to recognize some generic differences between the twelve orders, dividing them into three types of orderings. Based on his analysis of the different orderings, Dummett grouped the dozen different orders according to the degree of similarity.

If, now, in the light of this analysis, we look at the actual orders, we see that they divide into three sharply distinct types, which I shall arbitrarily label type A, type B, and type C. These types are to be distinguished according to two principles: where the Virtues come; and whether the Angel or the World is the highest card. In type A, the Angel is the highest trump, the World coming immediately below it. The three Virtues, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice, occur consecutively, usually interposed just above the lowest card of the middle segment, which, in orders of this type, as least whenever we can tell, is invariably Love. (GT 399.)

In orders of type B, something completely different happens. In these, the World is the highest trump, and Justice is promoted to the second highest position in the sequence, coming immediately below the World and above the Angel, the third highest card. There is clearly an association of ideas here: the Angel proclaims the last Judgment, at which justice will be dispensed. In orders of type B, Temperance always comes immediately above the Pope, and is separated from Fortitude, which comes three cards later, after Love and the Chariot. (GT 400.)

In an order of type C, the World is again the highest card in the sequence, but, this time, the Angel comes immediately below it. Of the Virtues, it is

Temperance that is promoted to a relatively high position, namely to just above Death and just below the Devil; any symbolic appropriateness in this escapes me. The remaining two Virtues are again separated and scattered within the middle segment, Justice in all cases coming lower. (GT 400.)

Overall, the variations reflected in the dozen early orders were in fact quite minor, and fell into three families or categories of ordering. In creating this taxonomy, Dummett simply called these categories A, B, and C. Dummett further observed each of the three early centers of the game, where Tarot was probably established by 1450, was associated with a different one of the three categories. Examples of type A, B, and C, were representative of Bologna, Ferrara, and Milan, respectively. So it would appear that these variations arose when Tarot first spread, and more trivial variations arose during what might be called Tarot's secondary diaspora, out from these three principal centers. Tom Tadfor Little introduced (as far as I know) the informative geographic labels for the three categories: Southern (from Bologna southward, including Florence, Rome, Sicily); Eastern (Ferrara and Venice), and Western (Milan, Pavia, France and elsewhere outside Italy). I'll use the Bolognese and Rosenwald orders (GT 399) to represent the Southern tradition, the Steele Manuscript and Metropolitan orders (GT 400) for the Eastern, and TdM and Vievil orders (GT 401) to illustrate the Western tradition. This is half of the dozen orders listed by Dummett, and illustrates most of the variation present in the historical orders. Not reflected are the later changes in subject matter within the Southern tradition, specifically in the Minchiate and Sicilian decks.

As an aside, one of the more common beliefs about Tarot is that there is numerological significance to the sequence of images. In fact, there was quite clearly no numerological design to early Tarot. Numbering was absent from most early decks, and when it was added there was no recognized correspondence between any of the subjects and their numbers, except for Death. (We will return to this below, to explain a peculiarity of one of the orderings.)

If we study the various numberings, we find very little in the way of any close association of numbers with particular subjects. Almost the only such association is that of the number 13 with Death. Even that is not invariable: but it occurs more frequently than the association of a particular number with any other card, even that of the number 1 with the Bagatto. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the cardmakers, or those for whose tastes they were catering, regarded this association as particularly appropriate, and strove to arrange for it. (GT 401.)

These are some of the historical considerations that need to be kept in mind when attempting to understand the meaning of the cards, some of the constraints that may help in solving the riddle. We'll add two more heuristic tools—tabular presentation and color coding.

The Riddle Resolved

The tables below are designed to illustrate the analyses introduced above, along with an explanation (some additional, some redundant) of the meaning of the generic design—archetypal Tarot—and some comments on individual variations. Each table shows one of the three segments of the Tarot sequence described by Dummett. Based on an iconographic study of the cards in sequence, each represents a distinct type of subject matter. The subject matter is identified in the title of the tables. The six columns of each table are divided into three groups, showing two representatives from each of Dummett's three regional categories. In this tabular form, the design of early Tarot becomes much more easily observable. The color-coding of cards within each table highlights some of the similarities and differences, the internal structure of each segment as they were changed in different locales. Finally, the overall structure of the TdM/Milanese sequence, (which I take to be the original design, in part because of this structure), is emphasized by highlighting every third trump.

The Three Estates

SOCIAL HIERARCHY — The Realm of Man					
Southern Decks		Eastern Decks		Western Decks	
<i>Bologna</i>	<i>Rosenwald</i>	<i>Steel MS</i>	<i>Metropolitan</i>	<i>TdM</i>	<i>Vievil</i>
Fool	Fool	Fool	Fool	Fool	Fool
Bagatto	Bagatto	Bagatto	Bagatto	Bagatto	Bagatto
Popess	Popess	Empress	Empress	Popess	Popess
Empress	Empress	Emperor	Popess	Empress	Empress
Emperor	Emperor	Popess	Emperor	Emperor	Emperor
Pope	Pope	Pope	Pope	Pope	Pope

The basic organizing principle here is the “ranks of man”, in which representatives of social status occupy an ordered, didactic arrangement. This social hierarchy always begins with the two commoners, and always ends with the Pope. It includes two representatives from each of the three estates—**commoners**, **nobles**, and **clergy**—another pervasive organizing principle of medieval thought, with examples of the lowest members of the lowest estate, and highest members of the nobility. There is no higher social station than the Pope, so this card completes and closes off the first section. Any higher ranked card *must* be of a different type, an allegorical image rather than a representative one. (Likewise, there can be no lower station than the Devil occupies in the eschatological realm, so that lowest ranking card necessarily begins the third section.

Because of their exalted and degraded status, respectively, the Pope and the Devil form inescapable internal boundaries of the design.)

The variations within the first section are readily interpretable. In the Bologna sequence, the numbering appears to have begun with Death at 13 and worked backward, so that the Popess would have been numbered 1. This odd situation did not occur, however, because the lowest ranking trumps were left unnumbered. In fact, the four rulers were not even ranked with regard to each other, so that there is no hierarchy to interpret. That variation may have derived from the difficulty of making Death number 13.

In the Steele MS order, the three estates of man are simply grouped together: two commoners, two nobles, and two religious figures. The two female figures, the Popess and Empress, are presumably taken as allegories of the Papacy and Empire in the Eastern tradition. In the Metropolitan deck, the Papacy trumps the Empire, as the Pope trumps the Emperor. In the other orderings, the Popess is taken at face value, as a Christian religious figure to be sure, but an unorthodox one, and therefore triumphed by the representatives of the Christian empire. This might reflect the state's role as executive arm of the Holy Inquisition.

The Three Estates and Tarot

Jacques LeGoff and Georges Duby have explored at length the trifunctional division commonly known as the "three estates": *oratores*, *bellatores*, *laboratores*, (those who pray, those who fight, and those who work). From around the tenth century, this division was presented as a necessary and God-given social reality. (One needn't be a Marxist to recognize the social utility of such a pre-ordained division of labor for the upper classes.) By the time Tarot was invented, this tripartite division was a long outdated description of society, to whatever extent it may have reflected social reality in the first place.

The supposedly clear-cut divisions between the three estates had been blurred by rising merchant and administrative classes, among other developments and the complications that had always confounded the simple scheme. The model itself, however, remained significant. Its social function was as a political lever, and its lack of distinctions beyond the three functional orders, along with its suggestion that the division was divinely inspired and unchanging, remained useful. Of course, the concept did in fact change. Duby demonstrated that the trifunctional model itself developed over time, partly as a reflection of the ongoing struggle between *Imperium* and *Sacerdotum*, but also noted that the religious ideal of three estates remained a powerful polemic.

Thus the division remained as a literary motif and more importantly, a religious ideal for centuries. The fact that this religious ideal was depicted in Tarot's ranks of man section, instead of a more contemporary urban reality, (as was shown in the Mantegna cosmograph's humanistic ranks of man, for example), is very revealing of the message of Tarot's author. Tarot was making a strong statement, not only of the primacy of the Church and Pope, but also of the distinctions between the three estates. No middling figures were shown, no craftsmen, merchants, or administrators, no gentlemen, knights, dukes or doges, but only examples of the highest and lowest roles. For commoners there is a vagrant fool and a professional deceiver or charlatan, while the nobles shown are emperor and empress, higher than kings. One clear message from this is, **Know your place!**

The six cards in this section were apparently counting cards, at least in some versions of the game. The Fool was one of the seven "Tarot Trumps" (*tarots par excellence*), (along with the Mountebank, the World, and the four Kings). The Mountebank, Popess, Empress, Emperor, and Pope were the five "Lesser Trumps" (*les quatre basses de triomphes*), which combined for points in groups of four or five.

The Fall of Princes

ALLEGORIES OF LIFE – The Realm of the Soul					
Southern Decks		Eastern Decks		Western Decks	
<i>Bologna</i>	<i>Rosenwald</i>	<i>Steel MS</i>	<i>Metropolitan</i>	<i>TdM</i>	<i>Vievil</i>
Love	Love	Temperance	Temperance	The Lover	Love
T. Chariot	Temperance	Love	T. Chariot	Chariot	Justice
Temperance	Justice	T. Chariot	Love	Justice	Tyranny
Justice	Fortitude	Fortitude	Fortitude	Hermit	Fortitude
Fortitude	T. Chariot	Wheel	Wheel	Wheel	Wheel
Wheel	Wheel	Hunchback	Hermit	Strength	Old Man
Old Man	Old Man	Hanged Man	Hanged Man	Hanged Man	Hanged Man
Traitor	Traitor	Death	Death	Death	Death
Death	Death			Temperance	Temperance

The basic organizing principle here is the "conditions of man", in which situational factors cycle through **triumphs**, **tribulations**, and **mortality**—another didactic arrangement, this one reflecting the three circumstances of life. A variety of allegorical circumstances, some good, some bad, some final, are mixed with the three **Moral Virtues**, the habits of moral living. Generally speaking, the sequences begin with Love and end with Death, the Wheel being the turning point in the middle. These three images are among the most pervasive and conventional allegories of the time, and their sequence in Tarot is fixed: Love, then the Wheel, then Death. The downward turn of events, from triumphs to death, exemplifies the Fall of Princes motif. It is characteristic of the times that Death (or Death with the angel of Temperance, in the Milanese design) should triumph over all the ranks (the previous section) and conditions of man, as in a Dance of Death cycle. This is a profound religious statement, part of the *De Contemptu Mundi* and *memento mori* sensibilities of medieval Christianity which were reflected in so many works of art and literature. All numbered decks have Death as number 13. (The fatal associations of the number 13 date back to the Last Supper, at least.) These elements were apparently design goals of all the decks, or at least, taking this as a general description, variations can be explained as the designers attempted to resolve some apparent difficulties.

The Bolognese design begins the sequence with Love and ends with Death, but when the deck was eventually numbered, they had to cheat to make Death come out as 13, as discussed above. The Rosenwald deck begins the numbering with the Mountebank as 1, and would therefore have Death as number 14. In this case, the problem was resolved by having the numbering stop at 12! Subsequent cards in that deck, from the Hanged Man through the Angel, are unnumbered. (GT 395.)

The Eastern tradition apparently wanted to shield the Pope from the indignity of being directly triumphed by Love, and therefore compromised the beginning of the section. It resolved the numbering problem quite gracefully, by recasting one of the allegorical cards into an eschatological role. Justice is no longer associated with the allegorical section, but precisely placed after the Last Resurrection and before New Jerusalem, as an allegory of Final Judgment with appropriate sword and scales. (This is obviously a derivative design, given that the conventional image of Justice remained unchanged, even though separated from the other two Moral Virtues.) This enables the allegorical section to end with Death, at number 13, without the kludge of beginning the numeration with the Popess. The Metropolitan sequence switches Love and the Chariot, perhaps to suggest the common motif of Venus triumphing over Mars, love over war. The Eastern tradition appears to be the most prim and proper (politically correct?) of the regional categories, protecting the Pope's virtue and augmenting the Apocalyptic section beautifully. (As an aside, it has been seriously maintained by one influential Tarot author that the resurrection had to be the last card in the sequence, as in the Southern tradition, else the design was somehow heretical. However, the Eastern sequence of resurrection to judgment, followed by the final reward in New Jerusalem is as orthodox as any imaginable, being taken directly from the Bible. See Da 12:2, Jn 5:28-9, Rev 20 & 21, etc. The Western sequence of resurrection followed by Christ Triumphant is equally orthodox, despite generations of occultists to this day insisting otherwise.)

The Milanese designer (who appears to be the original designer, based on various such comparisons of internal evidence), had a somewhat different concept. Although beginning the section with Love, he ended it with Death (at the desired number 13) *and* the promise of life eternal. The wings on Temperance are commonly considered to be a later error by an ignorant engraver following a corrupt model. They are more likely a clue to the significance of the card and the sequence. The angelic messenger indicates the presence of God, and holds an emblem of the Eucharist, (the practical means of triumphing over Death), the mixing of water and wine. The mixing of water and wine for the Eucharist is traditionally considered a reference to the dual nature of Christ, as well as the water mixed with blood which flowed from the wound on his side. It thereby forms a moral transition from the allegorical section to the eschatological: from the triumphs of virtue over the conditions of this life, to the triumphs of Christ in the next.

The Angel who triumphs over Death

There are also more mundane explanations for the triumph of Temperance over Death and the Hanged Man in the TdM sequence, and multiple biblical connections attesting to the

appropriateness of this image and ordering. On the most literal level, the virtue of Temperance reflected in speech and action may prevent being executed as a Traitor (the Hanged Man), while temperance in satisfying the appetites may forestall the Reaper himself. More to the spiritual point of the sequence, Temperance reflects faith in resurrection as expressed by St. Paul (quoting Isaiah 22:13): "If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'." (2 Co 15:32.) The converse of this is, if you believe in the resurrection of the virtuous, then you'd better be temperate – it is an act of faith. (If you don't believe in resurrection, then all bets are off—party on!) This is somewhat differently illustrated in Jesus' parable of the rich fool. The man had produced great wealth, and felt self-satisfied. "And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take it easy; eat, drink, and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.' ...This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." (Jesus, Lk 12:19-21.)

In Western art and literature, winged figures, (whether a Pagan Hermes or Christian angels as messengers of God), were also conventional psychopomps guiding and protecting the souls of the dead enroute to God. An ancient Christian funerary use of Pagan imagery involved a winged Athena-Nike or Victoria as symbolic of victory over death. This comes directly from St. Paul: Death is swallowed up in **victory**. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1-Co 1:54-57.) This is also stated in 1-John: For whatsoever is born of God, overcometh the world: and this is the victory which overcometh the world, our faith. (1-Jo 5:4.) So while the primary significance of the winged Temperance triumphing over Death may be as an angel displaying the Eucharist, there is a constellation of related associations with both the virtue and the winged figure which seem mutually reinforcing.

Certain commonalities appear in sub groupings of this section. In four of the sequences, the pairs Love-Chariot, Hermit-Wheel, and Hanged Man-Death are always adjacent. Thus, the three most conventional allegories, Love, Wheel of Fortune, and Death, are each paired with a less clearly defined image, suggesting a constraining context for interpreting the meaning of the Chariot, Hermit, and Hanged Man. Two of these three pairings are also maintained even in the more idiosyncratic Vievil and Rosenwald designs, which insert Justice or all three virtues between Love and the Chariot. (Given that context, perhaps the virtues are intended as a link rather than a separation between the allegories represented by the pair.) In all cases, both Love and the Chariot precede the Wheel and Hermit, while the Hanged Man and Death come last. The pairing of the three dominant allegorical subjects with the three less obviously defined ones is another clue to their interpretation. Because they were invariably paired by fifteenth-century Italians, we should also view them as paired.

Boethius, Tarot, and the *De Casibus* Tradition

The *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art* notes that Fortuna's "entry into Christian iconography is through Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae*, written in prison while awaiting execution in 542, where Fortuna explains to him that he should not complain about the reversal of fortune, since it is her nature to change." Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* is a particularly good source for parallels with this section of the Tarot sequence, which shows a tragic decline in circumstance, revolving around the Wheel of Fortune. This is an example of the *De Casibus* tradition of medieval tragedy, named after Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*, (*The*

Cases of Famous Men, aka *The Fall of Princes*), an encyclopedic collection of biographical sketches outlining the downfall of many notable figures throughout history, from Adam to his own time. Chaucer took this moralized historical account and presented it as "tragedy". In this tradition, tragedy is not necessarily connected with a character weakness ("tragic flaw"), sinful life, or even an error of judgment, but merely with the fickleness of fate. Boethius' autobiographical *Consolatione* provided the prototype narrative arc of this form of historical biography and medieval tragedy. The central section of the trump sequence illustrates it in the abstract.

Boethius even helps us understand particular images from the TdM pattern of Tarot. The Wheel, not surprisingly, shows iconographic detail clearly deriving from Boethius. Dummett suggests that the therianthropic figures on the TdM Wheel are a mistake by sloppy and/or ignorant woodcutters. However, Boethius was quite clear that attachment to the fickle favors of Fortune was not the way to God, and that those who would not become divine became instead animals. He said it that bluntly—"he who abandons goodness and ceases to be a man cannot rise to the status of a god, and so is transformed into an animal"—and he reiterated it and expanded on it. The iconography of the TdM Wheel, like the position and iconography of Temperance, appears informative rather than mistaken, and needs to be explained rather than explained away. This notion from Boethius also has application for the image on the TdM Moon. (Psalm 49 also hints at this idea, and concludes, "A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish.")

In more general terms, the Love-Chariot pair represents triumphs in love and war, victories, both personal and public. The Hermit-Wheel pair represents hardships, with the various guises of the Hermit showing age, infirmity, isolation and asceticism, or Time, while the Wheel is vicissitude, the ups and downs of Fate. The Hanged Man and Death are two visions of mortality: death for an individual's crimes, or the death that comes to all for Adam's crime. This is the sequence of both Boethius' life and of his lament in *The Consolation*: from his personal and political successes, through his trials and complaint against Fortune, his betrayal by "false charges", to his impending death. Just as the three estates of the first section constitute a schematic but encyclopedic representation of society, so do the successes, hardships, and mortality of the second section show us all the circumstances of life, (you win some, you lose some, you die), in an ordered manner, (the Fall of Princes motif), along with the Moral Virtues which a Christian life demands.

This win-some, lose-some, then-die cycle is the cycle of life in general. It is a schematic resume of life, and this is emphasized in the *Consolation*. Philosophy counsels Boethius, "...even if you refuse to acknowledge your previous good fortune because those seeming joys of earlier days have vanished, you still have no reason to count yourself wretched; for what you now think of as harrowing days are likewise passing away. It is not as if you are a stranger to the stage of life, treading the boards suddenly for the first time! You surely cannot believe that there is any regularity in human affairs, when the swift passage of time so often reduces men themselves to dust and ashes? It is true that only rarely can we place trust in the permanence of Fortune's gifts; but the closing day of human life brings an end also to such fortune as remains. So what difference do you think it makes, whether you abandon Fortune by dying, or whether she abandons you by making off?" (II:3.)

Boethius whines in reply: "But this is precisely what roasts me more fiercely as I contemplate it, for of all Fortune's blows, the unhappiest aspect of misfortune is to have known happiness." (II:4.) This life cycle of Fortune, up-down-out, is precisely what makes the vicissitudes agonizing. This ordering of events (cards) is not incidental, it is essential to the design of Tarot and its moral message. "There comes a time when [Fortune] does not deceive, and thus deserves well of men—I mean when she manifests her true self, removes her mask, and proclaims her ways.... My opinion in fact is that adverse Fortune benefits people more than good, for whereas when good Fortune seems to fawn on us, she invariably deceives us with the appearance of happiness, while adverse Fortune is always truthful, and shows by her mutability that she is inconstant. The first deceives, the second instructs... good Fortune with

her enticements diverts men from the path of the true good, whereas adverse Fortune often yanks them back with her hook to embrace true goods." And as noted above, this "benefit" of adverse Fortune is all the more potent because of the earlier good Fortune.

This win-lose-die narrative arc was so compelling that it became the conventional structure for moralized historical biographies of the later Middle Ages as well being the essence of medieval tragedy. The Boethian view of Fortune and man's downfall influenced many artistic works and illuminations. Jean de Meun's first chapter in *The Romance of the Rose* (The Advice of Reason, c. 1270s) recapitulates the Boethian view of Fortune in the affairs of men, and the author notes that he can provide many historical examples, (although he expands primarily on Nero and his teacher Seneca). In *De Casibus* (c. 1360s) Boccaccio catalogued the many examples de Meun only hinted at. A few decades later, the tradition was explicitly continued in Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* (c. 1390s). Lydgate's early fifteenth-century *The Fall of Princes* and Baldwin's sixteenth-century *A Mirror for Magistrates* were other notable examples of the *De Casibus* tradition. And in a neatly abstracted epitome, it became the central motif of the Tarot trump cycle, where this motif of moralized history was combined with the Moral Virtues, illustrating how each turn of the wheel is an opportunity and implied injunction to **Practice the Virtues**.

For some further comments on the significance of the middle section of the trumps and parallels in medieval thought, I've uploaded a [TarotL post](#) from 2/18/05.

Given the affinities suggested above and illustrated with the color coding, the Milanese design shows a striking structure. Each of the paired circumstances is triumphed by one of the three Moral Virtues. Not only are the three circumstances (triumphs, tribulations, and mortality) in an intelligible order as they are in all sequences, reflecting the *De Casibus* tradition; not only are the three pairs neatly grouped as pairs, as they are in four of the six illustrated sequences; but in addition, each of the pairs of circumstances is triumphed by one of the three Moral Virtues. It is beyond the scope of this essay to detail the appropriateness of each virtue to the preceding circumstance, but two points are worth noting: First, the basic unit of design is a triptych, with a pair of related figures triumphed by a moral allegory of some sort. In the ranks of man section discussed previously, these moral triumphs are religious figures, while in this section they are the three Moral Virtues. Religion triumphs over all the levels of society, as virtue triumphs over all the circumstances of life. The moral of this section is an injunction to virtue, as necessary to salvation in this arena as religion is in the social order. This may seem as boring and anachronistic today as the moral of the first section, ("know your place"), but it was one of the most characteristic themes of the era: "**Practice the virtues**". The second noteworthy point is that the sequence of virtues itself reflects an order of precedence established by St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologia*.

This middle section, the most conventionally allegorical of the three, was subject to the greatest variation from one locale to another. Social hierarchy and Christian eschatology permit less flexibility in their ordering than elements such as the Moral Virtues. Even so, the basic structure of the section was maintained intact in terms of the three pillars of the design: Love, the Wheel, and Death—the good, the bad, and the ugly circumstances of life. The variations of the allegorical cards in this section may simply have been intended to tell a slightly different allegorical story, (perhaps coinciding with some iconographic conflation to insinuate additional meanings), to emphasize different relationships, or perhaps simply to be more mnemonic, for the benefit of new players.

The idea that sequence conveys meaning is repeatedly exemplified here, as discussed above regarding Justice in the Eastern tradition. Love followed by the Chariot might suggest Petrarch's *I Trionfi*, with a female charioteer representing the triumph of Chastity over Love, while the Metropolitan's Chariot followed by Love might suggest Venus' triumph over Mars, an equally popular motif. And so on.

These first two sections are very conventional, in terms of common themes of the day. There is no real riddle here to speak of or solve (at least, not on this most literal level), only our failure to see what was reasonably obvious at the time. In the first section, we find a social hierarchy, explicitly representing each of the three estates and culminating in the Pope, while in the second we see a sequence of allegorical images, from Love through Death via the Wheel of Fortune. This could hardly be less occult, less esoteric, or more conventional as subject matter.

Tarot as a Triumph of Death

As noted above, the triumph of Death over the ranks and conditions of man is the essence of a Dance of Death motif. Robert V. O'Neill (*The Iconology of Early Tarot*, 2003) looked specifically for a connection between the Dance of Death tradition and the Tarot trump cycle, and found very limited similarities. However, he focused exclusively on simplistic one-to-one matching of images, (as had Seabury '51, Kaplan '78, Williams '94), rather than considering the actual meaning of either design. As always, context conveys meaning: Focused narrowly on the trees, it is not surprising that the forest was overlooked entirely. Although the Tarot trump cycle is not a Dance of Death cycle per se, the underlying significance is identical. Obviously, there are no skeletal figures dancing with each of the lower-ranking cards. However, like the traditional Dance of Death motif, Death is shown triumphing over all the ranks and conditions of man, the first two sections of the trump cycle. As in Holbein's Dance of Death, (turning tragedy into comedy), this is itself triumphed by the eschatological victory of Christ, over the Devil (recalling the origin of Death's dominion, for "sin reigned in death", Ro 5:21) and Death, via the Angel of resurrection and Christ Triumphant or New Jerusalem. The two approaches to the triumph of Death (D) over various figures (F#) may be illustrated as follows:

Tarot's Triumph of Death:

F1 F2 F3 F4 F5 ... D [Devil] Judgment

Holbein's Dance of Death:

[Serpent] F1-D F2-D F3-D F4-D F5-D ... Judgment

The two approaches teach the same lesson by telling somewhat different stories, as does Traini's Triumph of Death cycle at Camposanto and the many other literary and artistic presentations of death's reign in this world. The Catholic Encyclopedia describes Death's role in the various dramatized versions of the Dance of Death: "Death appeared not as the destroyer, but as the messenger of God summoning men to the world beyond the grave, a conception familiar both to the Holy Bible and to the ancient poets.... The purpose of these plays was to teach the truth that all men must die



and should therefore prepare themselves to appear before their Judge."

Ignoring the Creation and Fall of Holbein's design, which has no direct parallel in the trump cycle, (although obliquely related to Tarot's eschatological triumph over the Devil), we see two representations of the same content: Death's temporal triumph over all ranks and conditions of man, and God's eternal triumph over Death. But the designs can only be recognized as the same if we attend to the sequence. Although it is vastly more sophisticated, integrating other motifs into each section of the cycle, the overall design of the trump cycle is essentially an elaborated (the additional motifs developed into coherent sub-structures) Dance/Triumph of Death, in the same sense that the "Mantegna Tarocchi" is an elaborated cosmograph: Motifs such as the Three Estates and the Fall of Princes are integrated into the Tarot triumph of Death in the same manner that the Virtues and Liberal Arts were integrated into the "Mantegna" cosmograph.

As discussed above, such cycles of systematically-related images forming an overview of some subject area, a schematic pictorial encyclopedia, were characteristic of the era. In the particular case of Tarot, the series is an encyclopedia of salvation, illustrating the triumphs leading man to God in each realm of existence: religion over all ranks of society, virtue over all circumstances of life, and as we will see in the next section, Christ over the Devil and death. Moreover, associations of Love and Death with Adam's sin in the Garden (for love of his companion, deceived by the Devil) and God's punishment (Death), are fairly obvious, and lead directly to the need for salvation and resurrection. This foreshadows Christ's triumphs over the Devil and Death in the third section. (Less directly, they also mirror the Fool and deceiver (Mountebank) who began the first section, and the Pope who triumphs over it.)

The Devil and Death

BIBLICAL END TIMES — The Realm of Eternity					
Southern Decks		Eastern Decks		Western Decks	
<i>Bologna</i>	<i>Rosenwald</i>	<i>Steel MS</i>	<i>Metropolitan</i>	<i>TdM</i>	<i>Vievil</i>
Devil	Devil	Devil	Devil	Devil	Devil
Lightning	Lightning	Lightning	Fire	<i>Maison Dieu</i>	Lightning
Star	Star	Star	Star	Star	Star
Moon	Moon	Moon	Moon	Moon	Moon
Sun	Sun	Sun	Sun	Sun	Sun
World	World	Angel	Angel	Judgement	Trumpet
Angel	Trumpets	Justice	Justice	World	World
		World	World		

The third section remains relatively intact in all sequences. The first triad, Devil, Tower, Star, remains the same. If the Star is considered as an (indirect) allusion to Christ from

Revelation ("I am the bright Morning Star"), then we have Christ's triumph over Satan. The Devil is also an allegory of Sin, so triumph over the Devil reflects atonement for Adam's transgression by the "Second Adam". Christ's sacrifice atoned for Adam's sin, freed man from the Devil, and justified man to God. (TdM details like the bright star with seven lesser stars, the bird in the bush, and the woman with two ewers, can all be derived from passages in the Bible directly related to Christ in Revelation and to medieval allegories of Jesus' parable of the mustard seed.)

The second triad also remains functionally the same in all three sequences: the Moon and Sun are shown triumphed by either an image of resurrection (Angel or Judgement) or New Jerusalem (the World in the Bologna deck). This forms a conventional Triumph of Eternity (over time, represented by the Moon and Sun, and over the death which time inevitably heralds) motif, which can be seen in Apocalyptic art, or in illustrations of Petrarch's final triumph of *I Trionfi*. (Petrarch himself did not appear to intend this, leaving out the moon and focusing on the sun in his poem. However, his later illustrators could not resist the more traditional, biblically derived design, creating another example of conflated motifs.) This comes from Revelation 21:23, which says that the moon and sun will not be needed in the resurrected City of God, because it will be lit by the glory of God and the Lamb is its lamp. ("I am the light of the world.") Typologically, the resurrected faithful *are* the New Jerusalem, so either triptych represents the same passage. When the moon and sun are triumphed by the scene of resurrection, this motif also reflects Christ's resurrection, which enabled the resurrection of man, rescinding the punishment incurred by Adam. Moreover, it makes yet another identification with Christ: "I am the resurrection". In every case, just as the lowest card of this section is the Devil, immediately triumphed by fire from heaven, one of the final cards of the sequence shows resurrection, triumph over Death. The three Christ cards, the Star ("I am the bright Morning Star"), the Angel ("I am the resurrection"), and the World ("I am the light of the world") suggest Christ's triumphs over the Devil, Death, and over all.

Some comment on the more extreme variations in the Southern tradition is in order. In these decks, various overtly Christian images have been removed, and the highest cards do not suggest any eschatological message at all.

The World card shows the globe of the Earth, the four winds at the four corners of the Earth, and Europe in the center, suggesting not the New World of Revelation but a triumphant achievement in this world. Europe was at the time just beginning its discovery and colonization of a different "New World". The World card is followed not by the Angel of the Last Resurrection, heralding an ascent to Glory, but by Fama heralding a worldly glory. Given the image at the bottom of the Fame card, it is the glory of Florence being celebrated, triumphing over the eurocentric World card. Overall, it is a distinctly less medieval and Christian hierarchy than most early Tarot decks, reflecting the characteristically humanist sensibilities of the High Renaissance. It probably originated in Florence, and it is worth noting that the 1449 birth tray of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the great Florentine ruler and art patron, showed a Triumph of Fame, with imagery



Florence from
Minchiate Fame Card

taken from Boccaccio's *L'Amorosa visione* as well as the iconographic tradition of Petrarch's *Trionfi*. In any case, these changes made the Christian *Trionfo della Morte* more congenial to sophisticated late-fifteenth century tastes, for whom the original may have seemed quaint. The triumph of Fame over Death was reflected in various works of art. Tomb portraits provide an example:

In later Renaissance tomb portraits, especially at the highest social levels where humanist fame was most securely entrenched, we see a remarkable change in the late medieval imagery of death after 1500. Instead of a triumphant death humbling pious donors praying for salvation to Christ, we begin to see tomb monuments extolling the heroic worldly deeds and virtues of the deceased and their secular triumph over death through eternal fame. One example was the relief depicting Terrestrial Fame from Andrea Riccio's Tomb of Giralomo and Mercantonio della Torre executed in the late teens. Here the sculptor carved an allegory of the triumph of human mind over death. Pegasus, the winged horse, appears as a traditional classical image of intellectual glory and eternal fame, along with a vase inscribed "Virtue," causing a nearby Death to drop his scythe in defeat.

Humanist History as Moral Philosophy and the Secular Immortality of Fame.

The message of this later, characteristically Florentine style of Tarot deck may have been, in the words of a famous Florentine writer, *Mors acerba, fama perpetua, stabit vetus memoria facti*: Death is bitter but fame is forever, and the memory of this deed will endure. In addition to the Florentine replacement of the Christian triumph over Death with the humanistic triumph of Fame over Death, it is also noteworthy that, over time, all the Italian decks removed at least some of the obviously religious images from the trump cycle. Only in decks outside of Italy was the original design retained, although they too sometimes underwent changes.

The Economy of Salvation

GOD'S PLAN, the mythic kernel of the Bible, is sometimes referred to as the "economy of salvation". (The Greek term *oikonomia*, economy, is variously translated as dispensation, stewardship, or plan. Webster's defines the economy of God as "the divine plan for humanity, from creation through redemption to final beatitude.") This is what links the Creation and Fall in Genesis, Jesus' life and Passion in the Gospels, and Christ's return and the final defeat of the Devil and Death in Revelation. Adam, Eve, and the Serpent have their counterparts in Jesus, Mary, and Judas, and also in the returned Christ, the resurrected faithful and Bride of Christ, and Christ's eschatological triumphs over the Devil and Death. Both mythically and theologically, these parallels provide the backbone of Christianity. This is not merely *how* the Bible was structured, this is *why* the early Christians structured the Bible as they did, with this distinct parallelism. God's plan is usually analyzed into a number of *dispensations*, periods during which mankind's relation to God is established along certain lines, according to *covenants*. The Creation, Adam's Fall and punishment (death) established the pattern. The

Incarnation, atonement (death), and resurrection of Jesus balanced the scales. And the Second Coming and Christ's final triumphs over the Devil and Death bring history to a conclusion, the triumph of Eternity over time.

The Economy of Salvation		
Genesis 1-3	<i>Creation</i> Adam / Eve Serpent	Original Sin Fall & Punishment(Death—Separation)
Old Testament	Israel >< Church	Typology
Gospels & Epistles	<i>Incarnation</i> Jesus / Mary Judas	Redemption Crucifixion & Resurrection
Revelation 20	<i>Second Coming</i> Christ / The Faithful Devil & Death	Judgment Resurrection & Judgment
Revelation 21	<i>Wedding</i> Groom / Bride	Glorification Re-union w/God

Christ's triumphs over the Devil and Death, in that order, are repeatedly described in the Bible. In the Tarot sequences, we see this played out in pictures. The Devil, fire from heaven, and the Star (an emblem of Jesus based on his self-proclaimed title from Revelation), show the first scene of this final act in the Christian drama. The Triumph of Eternity motif, showing the temporal lights of this world (emblematic of the temporal nature of fallen man) triumphed by either the Last Resurrection or the resurrected Jerusalem, represents the conquest of the final adversary of Christ, Death itself, triumphed over by the eternal light of the world to come. This is more than an oddity from Revelation, however. The authors of the New Testament and the Fathers of the Church were not just spitballing—they created a unified work from the library of books that are collected in the Bible. At the heart of that unification was the parallelism between Adam's Fall, Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, (as the first fruits of the general resurrection), and his ultimate eschatological triumphs. The medieval emphasis on typology exhibited in works like the *Biblia Pauperum* and *Speculum humanae salvationis* was a natural reflection of this understanding of the Bible. Triumph over the Devil and death cannot be achieved by man. That is why the Devil is a high-ranking card, triumphing over even the Pope and the Moral Virtues. Only Jesus by his sacrifice can redeem Adam's sin, and only in Christ's resurrection is the punishment of death rescinded. Although his death and resurrection are historical, we appear to live and die just the same. Christ's ultimate triumphs will be eschatological, post-Millennial, as described in chapter 20 of Revelation. This too must be taken on faith, and the moral of this final section of the Tarot cycle is, **Trust in God**.

This section is where we see the effects of the original riddle. If Christ's triumphs over the Devil and Death were the entirety of the intended meaning, then we still have a very puzzling design. **Those triumphs could have been much more simply and conventionally illustrated**—why are they represented with novel and somewhat oblique images? The detailed answer to that entails finding a version of Tarot that makes sense in all its particulars, and sorting out how it was designed and what it meant, in painstaking detail. That version will be representative of the original design, and its design will explain the peculiarities of all its descendants. In general terms, however, the answer is simply that **there were other meanings intended in the original design**, in addition to the triumph of Christ over the Devil and Death. Even though the other original layers of meaning were largely lost in later decks (through iconographic simplifications, reordering of the sequences, and conflation with other motifs), and even though the design of the eschatological section is not as "obvious" (at least not to us today) as the first two sections, the crucial triumphs over the Devil and Death remained visible in all versions of Tarot, and they constitute the third example of encyclopedic Christian design in the sequence.[D]

Subtle Meaning beneath the Riddle

In the above interpretation the Star is considered an indirect reference to Christ, from the last lines of Revelation. (Some of the early cards have iconography which clearly supports the Star as a reference to Christ.) In the passage where Jesus proclaims himself the bright Morning Star, he also says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city." (22:14.) To wash one's robes in the blood of the Lamb and thereby make them white means to have **faith**. We are justified—our robes made white—by our faith that Jesus was the Christ, and that his sacrifice—the blood of the Lamb—was sufficient atonement. Righteousness is ascribed to us by virtue of our faith

in Christ, (Romans 3 & 4) which is how we are justified through faith, and are then worthy to stand before God's judgement. Jesus says that he has given John this testimony (the vision, i.e., the Book of Revelation) for the churches, and again, testimony is the basis of **Faith**. Faith is the first of the three Theological Virtues, but this would hardly seem to be a primary association of the Star card, unless something else supported it.

In the above interpretation the Angel of Resurrection is also considered a Christ card, indirectly referring to another of Jesus' self-proclaimed appellations: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies". (Jn 11:25.) This suggests another association, with the Theological Virtue of **Hope**. It is precisely hope of salvation, resurrection into the eternal presence of God, which is referred to by that virtue. Again, this would hardly seem to be a primary association of the Angel or Judgement card, unless something else supported it. We do have the three Moral Virtues clearly shown in the series, and these associations with two of the three Theological Virtues suggest looking for the rest. In the Milanese sequence, as illustrated above, not only do these five virtues appear equally spaced, but the highest trump is a unique version of Christ Triumphant. Christ would be a suitable subject for an allegory of **Love**, the highest of the Theological Virtues, because of course, God is Love (1-Jn 4:16) and "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (Jn 3:16.) The uniqueness of the Christ Triumphant image in Tarot is that a feminine figure is shown, a Christ with breasts. This oddity connects the image with conventional allegory of Charity or Love, which shows a nursing figure, a Madonna, or the mythical pelican which nursed its offspring with blood from its breast (and which is equally an allegory of Christ). It is also noteworthy that the three Theological Virtues, which are all directed toward God as their object and which are all "infused" from God, should be associated with the three Christ Cards.

At this point, the associations of the three Christ Cards with the three Theological Virtues, appearing in the correct Pauline sequence (1-Co 13:13), combined with the presence of the three Moral Virtues, equally spaced in the Milanese sequence, appears persuasive that at least part of the choice of subject matter was determined by the desire to create a ladder of virtues as an allegorical layer of meaning. This only appears in the Milanese design, although aspects of it remain in the simplified designs of other patterns. Yet if we have these six of the seven Cardinal Virtues, we must expect Prudence to be included as well. And if every third card is to be a virtue, then both the Popess and Pope need to be accounted for. One virtue, two figures—an insurmountable problem? Hardly: Prudence was traditionally portrayed with two faces, a young woman and a bearded man. As these two cards are part of a social hierarchy, it is significant that there are two forms of Political Prudence: **Regnative Prudence**, appropriate to rulers, and **Political Prudence** per se, appropriate to the governed. (St. Thomas Aquinas, ST II:ii:50, following Aristotle: "The Philosopher says (Ethic. vi, 8) that 'of the prudence which is concerned with the state one kind is a master-prudence and is called legislative; another kind bears the common name political, and deals with individuals'.") This reading is confirmed by noting that one of the two Prudence cards triumphs over a pair of commoners while the other triumphs over a pair of monarchs. There can be no doubt that an intricately designed ladder of virtues was a key element of the subtle meaning of Tarot's trump cycle, and that it was designed by someone of considerable sophistication. Many interpretations and justifications can be imagined for the Popess, (and some were given above) but the essential reason for her inclusion is the construction of this ladder of virtues. Moreover, there can be no doubt that the Milanese design was the original version of Tarot, or at least the surviving descendent which best exemplifies that original design.

Although systematically developed deeper meanings apparently resided only in the original design, remnants of it remain visible in the other decks as well. For example, the trump sequence of Fire (from Heaven), Star, Moon, Sun, radiant Angel, and finally New Jerusalem or Christ Triumphant, has suggested to many observers a hierarchy of increasing light. This has an obvious mystical interpretation of increasing

enlightenment, based on symbolism as old as any recorded, and no doubt older than history itself. Like cross-cultural comparisons and psychological interpretations, such vaguely perceived mystical interpretations are not necessarily mistaken; but they are premature and remain mere guesswork without a specific and reasonably detailed explanation of why the particular subjects were selected and placed in a particular order, preferably an explanation based on literary or artistic sources.

Dance of Death Redux

While paying attention to the details, to various associations, amplifications, and the several integrated motifs that make up the complex design of the Tarot trumps, it is important to keep in mind the overall design as well. The triumph over the Devil, who led man to sin in the Garden and thereby brought death (Ro 5:12), and over Death itself—Christ's final adversary, ("The last enemy to be destroyed is death", 1-Co 15:26) is a perfect eschatological conclusion to Tarot's Triumph of Death design. The details of this final section of the trumps cycle are peculiar, but while the details might be either incidental to the meaning of the design or essential to a more complex and subtle meaning of the design, we must recall the words of Tuve: "the principal drift governs the meanings attributable to the incidents born upon the stream; the latter cannot take their own moral direction as they choose. If we ignore the stream's main direction of flow, and embark on incidents which travel counter to or unrelated to it, arriving at special separable meanings for such incidents, we shall presently drown farcically, amid the laughter of the characters, who sit on the bank well protected by the natures the author gave them, only waiting for the chance to push us in." If we focus on the overall design, we will not be lead astray by speculations about the subtleties and complexities (or meaningless errors and embellishments) that we do not initially understand.



Finally, the three "Christ cards" (Star, Angel, and World) and the Moon and Sun (part of the Triumph of Eternity motif) were apparently counting cards, at least in some versions of the game. They formed the five "Greater Trumps" (*les quatre hautes de triomphes*), as well as Minchiato's unnumbered *arie*. The Greater Trumps were combined for points in groups of four or five.

The Solution in Summary

As Decker et al. noted, "the test of whether a coded text has been correctly deciphered is that it allows a coherent message to be read." A triumph of Death cycle with sub-motifs from the most popular works of the time, (including *Vado Mori*, *Dance of Death*, Boethius, Boccaccio, Aquinas, and the Bible), based largely on conventional images, is more than a merely coherent message. It is a deeply characteristic expression of many of the most pervasive sensibilities of the era. Beyond producing a coherent message, three principle criteria of a good explanation can be considered: **sufficiency** (explanatory power or adequacy), **necessity** (conceptual parsimony and simplicity), and **cogency** (internal consistency, theoretical integration, overall relevancy, etc.) The present interpretation is a simple yet adequate explanation, and one with a closely-related historical cognate. The interpretation is keenly relevant to the period and appropriate to

the use of the series in a game of triumphs. The deciding factor is **comparison** with alternative explanations using the same criteria. Unfortunately, it is difficult to compare most Tarot interpretations because few of them are clearly or analytically developed. Most of them have very little explanatory value at all, being created for purposes other than historical explanation. However, some such comparisons, both explicit and implicit, have been developed here. My conclusion is that while many details remain to be addressed, (and despite the fact that a scholarly treatment by someone sufficiently knowledgeable is just wishful thinking), the Riddle of Tarot is solved.[E] We now know why these subjects were selected and placed in this order—we know the original significance of the Tarot trumps.[F] The basis for this solution is viewing the trump cycle as a unified composition, and focusing on internal contextual evidence of meaning, including the sequence of the cards and obvious affinities between related subjects, such as Empress and Emperor, or the three Moral Virtues. The hierarchical trump cycle is a composite work (the kind of thing Seznec termed a “visual summa”). Endless examples of composite works from the Middle Ages and Renaissance attest to the prevalence of such designs.

- **The Dance of Death** is the closest cognate to the trump cycle as a whole.

The overall design of the trump cycle is in fact a Triumph of Death motif, elaborated, in the same manner that Holbein elaborated his *Dance of Death*, with the eschatological victory over death. After the Fall of man section from Genesis, which has no parallel in Tarot, Holbein's design has a ranks of man (social hierarchy) section followed by a conditions of man (circumstances of life) section, culminating in Christ's eschatological triumph over Death. This tripartite design is echoed in Tarot's sequence, which begins with a ranks of man section followed by conditions of man, culminating in eschatological victory over Death. The three types of subject matter within the Tarot sequence contribute to a unified overall design, just as the sections of Holbein's *Dance of Death* form an integrated design. The specific division of the trump cycle into three coherent sections can be established via iconographic study of the cards or, as Dummett demonstrated, by studying the commonalities in the early orderings of the cards. Shephard's label for the tripartite design is apropos.

- **The Three Worlds**

The Realm of Man, the Realm of the Soul, and the Realm of Eternity are each represented in the Tarot cycle via sub-structures, leading to a highly complex design. Each of these secondary motifs is as conventional as the Dance of Death itself, and their identification is more descriptive than interpretative. There are in fact two representatives from each of the three estates illustrated in the lowest-ranking trumps; a reversal of fortune is in fact shown in the transition from Love and the Triumphal Chariot, via Time and the Wheel of Fortune, to the Hanged Man and Death; the Devil's reign is in fact overthrown and Death overcome in the final section of the sequence.

- **The Three Estates**
- **The Fall of Princes**

- **Revelation's triumph over the Devil and Death**

The lowest ranking trumps represent a social hierarchy based on the Three Estates tradition. Religious figures triumph over secular, noble over common, men over women, and Christ's vicar on earth triumphs over all. The commoners are always the lowest, and no social figure could outrank the pope, so subsequent images must be of a different type. The use of the Three Estates makes the grouping comprehensive, a schematic but ordered and encyclopedic representation of society. The Three Estates motif and the triumph of the Pope demonstrate the essentially conservative and mainstream design of the work.

The central section of the trump cycle represents a Fall of Princes motif. From the endless possible circumstances, typical examples, (victory in love and war, Time and Fortune, and execution or a more generic end), were abstracted and arranged to epitomize the Boethian life cycle of success, misfortune, and death. A millennium after Boethius' *Consolatione*, the same downward narrative arc or reversal of fortune (the *De Casibus* tradition) was a convention for both moralized history (Boccaccio) and tragedy (Chaucer). Triumphs, hardships, and mortality constitute another schematic but comprehensive grouping, this time of all the circumstances of life.



Various medieval attitudes of spiritual disdain for things of this world (*contemptu mundi*), historical decline (*ubi sunt*), and the inevitability of death (*memento mori*, etc.), were reflected in the Boethian view that divine justice was only to be found in resurrection and judgment: in this world Fortune had a relatively free and capricious hand. ("What else do the groans of tragedy lament but the overthrow of prosperous kingdoms by the random blows of Fortune?")

The Stoic Christian saw Fortune's Wheel as the mechanism of the Fall of Princes, and Fortune was characteristically triumphed over by Virtue. Seneca wrote that "Fortune can only take away what she has given, but she does not give virtue." Petrarch wrote *De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae* and *De Viris Illustribus*, both of which illustrated 1) the rule of Fortune over all things in this life excepting virtue, 2) both good and bad fortune as a Stoic test of moral strength, and 3) the triumph of virtuous men over fortuitous circumstance. (Unlike the Stoics, Petrarch viewed this as preparation for the Christian's life after death.) The moral question is how to respond to the vagaries of Fortune, and the Milanese trump cycle shows the answer. The response to triumphs in love and war, both of which confer dominion, requires Justice; the response to to Time (or the asceticism of the Hermit) and Fortune's turning wheel, requires Fortitude; the response to betrayal and mortality requires Temperance, as a pledge of faith in the Christian triumph over Death. The contest between Fortune and Virtue takes the shape of a Fall of

Princes narrative arc. Ultimately, however, the Fall of Princes ends in Death, and thus both Fortune and Death triumph over all the ranks of man in the lowest trumps.

While treacherous Fortune and Death were inescapable and moral virtue offered no refuge in the world of Time, virtue offered hope of reward in Eternity. Boccaccio's *Fall of Princes* literary genre was essentially a *Dance of Death* genre, based on the Boethian view of Fortune. Boccaccio and his literary followers recounted the demise, characteristically as a result of misfortune, of an encyclopedic collection of famous men. In the Tarot sequence, we see the ranks and conditions triumphed by a single image of Death, rather than having the dead accompany each figure. This form permitted the additional complexity or layers of meaning in the design, composed as a triumphal hierarchy, but the controlling idea is the same. In this sense, the triumph of Death in this section, the *De Casibus* motif, and the emphasis on the virtues all pointed beyond this world to the next.

The highest ranking trumps represent eschatological victories over the Devil and Death, and the ultimate triumph of God's plan. The final section of the Tarot sequence begins with the Devil. This takes us into a third realm of existence, a third type of subject matter, eschatological. "When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and go out to deceive the nations, Gog and Magog... But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur...." (Rev 20:7-10.) This description of the Devil and Lightning/Fire cards is fairly direct, and signals the beginning of the End Times, immediately after the Millennium. "The first angel sounded the trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth." (Rev 8:7.) This victory was made possible by Christ, whose self-proclaimed title as author of Revelation was "the bright Morning Star". (Rev 22:16; cf. Rev 2:26-28.) This triptych, Devil, Lightning, Star, shows Christ's triumph over Satan, one of his two eschatological adversaries.

The other great opponent is Death. "Since the children have flesh and blood, [Christ] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil..." (Heb 2:14.) "For [Christ] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Co 15:25-26.) After the Devil is vanquished in Revelation 20:9, the dead arise, "and death and Hades give up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire." (Rev 20:14.) In Tarot, the triumph over death is shown via resurrection. Typologically the resurrected faithful are the New Jerusalem. This explains the sequence of Moon, Sun, and either the Angel (of resurrection) or World (showing New Jerusalem), in terms of Revelation 21:23. New Jerusalem "does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." "The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." (Rev 11:15.)

From the first trumpet to the last, the triumph over Christ's two eschatological adversaries is a third encyclopedic design. The defeat of the Devil and triumph over

Death from chapter 20 of Revelation are linked to Adam's sin and punishment, as well as Jesus' death and resurrection, and thus conclude Christian history. Because of the deeply interrelated typology created by the Church over the centuries, such a simple design can effectively epitomize, or at least call to mind, the entire Christian mythos of man and God, beginning with Adam's Fall from grace, through Christ's death and resurrection, to the Apocalyptic denouement of the Last Judgment and the new world to come, the "world without end."

Every historical variation of sequence honored this division into three sections. This suggests that the division was obvious enough and important enough to be respected even by people who either didn't grasp or didn't like all of the other allegorical content of the original (whatever that might have been). The very people who redesigned the sequence maintained this larger design. That historical uniformity is something that every theory of Tarot's early meaning needs to take into account, as it requires some explanation. It tells us something about the way fifteenth-century Italians saw the cards, and thereby gives us some basis for our speculations about the meaning of the images and their sequence. The Milanese/TdM pattern showed another conventional motif as well.

- **A Ladder of Virtues**

That, however, is a long story in itself. But, in all the early variations, the rest of the underlying design of Tarot can still be seen. That design is the solution to the riddle of Tarot, the intended meaning, the author's message. Not surprisingly, it reflects many of the most common motifs and several of the most influential works of the Middle Ages. In each section of the sequence, in each of the three realms of existence, the story is about salvation, and the roles of man and God in that process. In each section, the content is fundamental and orthodox Christian teachings. And in each section, the design shows the kind of encyclopedic sensibility that should be expected in a work of that time and place. In *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Johan Huizinga wrote:

Towards the end of the Middle Ages two factors dominate religious life: the extreme saturation of the religious atmosphere, and a marked tendency of thought to embody itself in images. Individual and social life, in all their manifestations, are imbued with the conceptions of faith. There is not an object nor an action, however trivial, that is not constantly correlated with Christ or salvation. All thinking tends to religious interpretation of individual things; there is an enormous unfolding of religion in daily life.

That's what the riddle of Tarot was all about: Tarot is a story of Christian salvation, schematic but encyclopedic, and the role of man and God in that story. As the story of Christian salvation may be considered a likeness of the "truth", an *eikos mythos*, so is the story of Tarot.[G]

Notes

It should go without saying that although this presentation A. makes many references to Dummett's analyses in *The Game of Tarot*, it seems unlikely that he would endorse such a (mis)use of his work. In quoting him at length, I do not intend to imply that he would agree with any of my own conclusions, any more than I agree with his suggestion that the images are a kind of sampler of triumphal images. He refers to Gertrude Moakley's "brilliant suggestion" that the name *trionfi* derives from the subject matter of the trump cycle, but admits that it is difficult to discern what the underlying concept of the triumphal sequence might be. (GT 87.) Elsewhere, he writes that the designer selected "a number of subjects, most of them entirely familiar, that would naturally come to the mind of someone at a fifteenth-century Italian court", and that "it is rather a random selection". (GT 387.)

Moreover, most of my interpretation was developed before I even learned of his analysis of the early decks. I arrived at my interpretation based solely on the iconography and sequence of the cards as described and illustrated in Kaplan's *Encyclopedia*. I have chosen to present my interpretation in the context of Dummett's analyses because he has written the most comprehensive and reliable book on Tarot, which establishes many historical constraints for any study of early Tarot; he has framed the null hypothesis of a triumphal sampler and demonstrated its sufficiency for most historical purposes; he has pointed the way toward a study of sequential meaning, and done all the hard work of discovering and analyzing the early trump orders; and in my opinion, his findings support my conclusions... but that certainly doesn't mean that he would agree.

Most art critics have little interest in deciphering the B. "author's message" in any work, and Postmodern critics in particular are inclined to deny any validity to such concepts. (There was a flourishing interest in the subject matter of antique art early in the 20th century, the Warburg school of art historians, but that seems to have subsided.) Moreover, analysis of allegory in general has been deprecated as critical fantasy rather than essential content. So perhaps it is just as well that Tarot has not gotten much attention as a work of art. While art critics complain that allegorical studies of subject matter are irrelevant or insufficiently constrained by the work and therefore open to endless variant readings, occultists have the opposite lament. They *insist* on Tarot being considered an "open work", and reject the idea that Tarot could have meaning, in the sense of an intelligible message to convey: something intended by the designer, transmitted by the work, and understood by others. P.D. Ouspensky wrote in 1913, "A symbol may serve to transfer our intuitions and to suggest new ones only so long as it's meaning is not defined. Real symbols are perpetually in process of creation; but when they receive a definite significance they become hieroglyphs and finally a mere alphabet. As this, they express simply ordinary concepts, cease to be a language of the Gods or of initiates and become a language of men which everyone may learn".

To many art critics and occultists alike, Tarot will always be "beyond" rational analysis, and the mere suggestion that there is a riddle to be solved is considered an admission of naiveté. To those who inhabit such worlds, this essay is a confession. In my defense I would point out that 1) those who make such arguments, whether from occultist or Postmodern premises, tend to offer absurd interpretations with no explanatory value; that 2) most of the Tarot images are not "symbols" in the occultist sense but quite conventional emblems representing "ordinary concepts" such as Love, Justice, Fortune, Death, etc.; and that 3) while we cannot achieve perfection or absolute certitude in the quest for intended meaning, that does not invalidate the attempt; after all, we cannot achieve perfection in any other realm either. The fact remains that some explanations are better than others, and many puzzles can be solved.

Dummett declined to comment on the various interpretations C. that have been concocted over the last two centuries. Because I am presenting my own such interpretation, I am obliged to acknowledge and comment on earlier attempts to understand the images and their sequence. While a review of the literature interpreting Tarot's trump cycle is beyond the scope of this essay, Robert V. O'Neill's *Tarot Symbolism* (1986) can be consulted: it is the best critical survey of earlier interpretations available. In that regard, it is sufficient to note that it is a compendium of negative results. Likewise, A.E. Waite wrote, "the sentence to be pronounced on previous attempts is either that they do not work, because of their false analogies, or that the scheme of

evolved significance is of no real consequence", and that remains a valid summary statement. Nonetheless, a few comments are required about those interpretations which have touched on the same topics as mine.

Although the present interpretation is quite different from any earlier attempt, both in its approach and its results, some aspects of it have precursors. Most notably, **Michael Dummett** analyzed the trumps into three groups, which are precisely the same as the groupings used here. The iconographic interpretation into three types of subject matter (the "Three Worlds motif") is confirmed by the actions of fifteenth Italians who re-ordered the trumps, as shown by Dummett's analysis: in each case, they maintained the division into three groups, reflecting three types of subject matter which they considered distinct and kept separate. **Arthur Edward Waite** discussed the trumps as a composite design in the 1926 article quoted above, "The Great Symbols of the Tarot", although he failed to correctly identify the groupings and found some images completely obscure. Those he termed "symbolical". (The practice of calling whatever is not understood "symbolical" and making up any interpretation that suits your purpose continues to this day among Tarot enthusiasts. Since they generally understand the conventional significance of none of the images, they consider them all symbolical.) **John Shephard** also noted three types of subject matter in the trumps, and offered useful labels for them, (a "Three Worlds" motif, with realms of Man, the Soul, and Eternity), although his preconceptions prevented him from correctly identifying either the groupings themselves or their significance. The Realm of Man shows a ranks of man in which the governing principle is God's division into *oratores*, *bellatores*, and *laboratores*. The Realm of the Soul shows a fall of princes motif, reflecting the vicissitudes and mortality of this life. The Realm of Eternity shows the triumphs of Christ, already accomplished by his death and resurrection, but to be finally revisited at the second coming.

Most other similarities between the present interpretation and those of earlier works are more apparent than real. For example, William Marston Seabury first pointed to a connection between Boccaccio's *De Casibus* and the Tarot trumps, in the posthumous and privately published book, *Tarot Cards and Dante*, (1951). However, he did not understand what that connection might be, because, like so many others before and after him, he was content with implied analogies between supposed influences and specific Tarot images taken out of their sequential context. It is in fact the *sequence* of the images which establishes in the trumps a *De Casibus* or *Fall of Princes* motif. Although Seabury completely misunderstood the significance of the trump cycle, his work should be remembered for at least two things. First, as noted by Dummett, he attempted to interpret the trumps, (however loosely), in terms of period-appropriate subject matter; this broke with occultist precedent and established the tradition followed by Moakley, Shephard, Betts, and few others. Second, he saw, (however dimly), a connection with the *De Casibus* tradition.

In addition to the Three Worlds division of the trump cycle, four other principal motifs are identified in the present interpretation (see The Solution in Summary section) as characterizing the literal design of the Trump sequence: The Dance of Death, the Three Estates, the Fall of Princes, and Revelation's triumph over the Devil and Death. Here are the most notable precursors to those interpretations that I have found in Tarot books.

- **William Marston Seabury** discussed Holbein's *Dance of Death* at some length, listing eleven card subjects which he found in that work. Unfortunately, he failed to draw any conclusion from this, simply adding it to his catalog of medieval analogies, including Dice & Chess, Florentine Guilds, the Feast of Fools, and above all, Dante. **Gertrude Moakley** compared the trump sequence to Petrarch's *I Trionfi*, and although the analogy fails, the triumph of Death (over Love, &c.) and the triumph of Eternity (over Time and Death, &c.) do parallel the design of the trump cycle, and for that matter, the design of Holbein's *Dance of Death*. No one appears to have drawn the specific parallels between the detailed design of Holbein's sequence and the Tarot sequence. However, in early 2005 I discovered that the author of *The Invention of Printing* (1876) came closest to directly foreshadowing the present interpretation, even though the author knew virtually nothing about Tarot—not even the name "Tarot"! He clearly saw the manner in which both works illustrate the triumph of death over the ranks and conditions of man, with death itself then triumphed by resurrection to Judgment. I will therefore quote his discussion in full.

- **Theodore Low De Vinne** (1828–1914): "The illustration on the next leaf [TdM trumps with Juno and Jupiter] is the reduced fac-simile of a suite of twenty-two playing cards, intended, apparently, to convey solemn religious truths in the form of a game of life and death. We do not know how the game was played: we have to accept the figures upon the cards as their own explanation and commentary. In the figures of Jupiter and of the Devil, we see the powers which

shape the destinies of men. The Wheel of Fortune is emblematic of the fate which assigns to one man the condition of a Hermit, and to another that of an Emperor. The virtues of Temperance, Justice, and Strength which man opposes to Fate, the frivolity of the Fool, the happiness of the Lover (if he can be happy who is cajoled by two women), and the pride of the Empress, are all dominated by the central card bearing an image of the skeleton Death—Death which precedes the Last Judgment and opens to the righteous the House of God. In these cards we have a pictorial representation of scenes from one of the curious spectacle plays of the middle ages, which were often enacted in the open air to the accompaniments of dance and music. The union of fearful mysteries with ridiculous accessories, and the ghastly suggestion of the fate of all men, as shown in the card of Death the reaper—these were the features which gave point and character to the series of strange cartoons popular for many centuries in all parts of civilized Europe under the title of the *Dance of Death*."

- **Waite** noted that "there is no doubt that some of [the cards] correspond to estates and types", the ranks and conditions of the first and second sections of the trump cycle. However, he failed to see the Three Estates motif reflected in the trumps. As far as I know, no later Tarot author saw this obvious design element either, although some mention "estates" of man in a perfunctory manner. However, these later writers fail to even discern clearly the fact that there are distinct types of subject matter, much less what the divisions are or what organizing principles were represented in any of the three sections. (Waite was, in a number of ways, the most insightful commentator on Tarot before Moakley and Dummett.)

- **Seabury** suggested a connection with Boccaccio's *De Casibus*, discussed above. **Waite**, although neither clear nor direct about most things, described the Chariot as "the King in his triumph, typifying, however, the victory which creates kingship as its natural consequence", and said of Death, "it is, in its current and patent meaning, more especially a card of the death of Kings." Given that and the iconography of his own deck, (in which these two riders are paired, illustrated in similarly graphic, largely black and white images), Waite appears to have intended something like the Fall of Princes motif for this section of the trumps. (He would, of course, be far more concerned with the mystical interpretation of this, kingship referring to ego sovereignty and death being the end of that reign.) Various occultists have described the central section as leading to purgation, which can be related to the reversal of Fortune motif, and Waite appears to have seen the literal aspect of that more distinctly than anyone else. **Moakley** wrote, "between the triumphs of Love and Death, Fortune turns her wheel", but instead of recognizing this as a Fall of Princes motif, she continued, "and dispenses both joy and sorrow. The more sophisticated Italians of the Renaissance would find a deeper meaning in the idea that Fortune points to the equivalence of the two seemingly opposite trumps..." However, no Tarot author has identified the Boethian narrative arc clearly, much less associated it with Boccaccio's tradition, which was popular at the time and place of Tarot's invention.

- **Waite** also noted that some of the higher-ranked cards, "including the Resurrection card and the Devil", "are doctrinal in character". **Moakley** identified one element of the design, a triumph of Eternity over the Moon and Sun, although she incorrectly attributed it to Petrarch. (His poem fails to mention the moon in that regard, Time being symbolized by the sun, while the correct source is much older and more influential: Rev 21:23.) **Timothy Betts** developed an Apocalyptic interpretation of the entire trump cycle, but most of it was arbitrary, because like so many others before him, he took both cards and his comparison images out of their native context, simplistically matching image to image, and then inventing a largely ad hoc narrative about them. Again, as far as I am aware, no other Tarot author has identified the eschatological triumphs over the Devil and Death as the crux of the higher-ranking cards, or the relation of that to the Triumph of Death shown in the lower 2/3 of the trump cycle.

Although Tarot retained a meaningful design in all of the D. patterns described above, it is only in the original pattern that the extreme sophistication of the work is seen. No examples of this original pattern, or its direct descendants, have survived from the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. Very few decks of any early pattern survived, (except for the hand-painted examples, which were in various ways atypical), and the fifteenth-century Italians were quite creative in revising the original design. Fortunately, however, the French apparently didn't care much about the allegorical content, and were largely content to copy the same designs over and over for centuries. Certainly variations crept in, and some intentional redesigns took place, but some versions continued to show precise copying of their earlier models, and I believe that *at least* one line of descent remained very similar to a design brought from Milan circa 1500. Such a Milanese design, I believe, was the original, and its descendant survived with virtually all of the original's complexity and beauty intact. The earliest surviving example of this design is by Francois Chosson, from the late seventeenth century. It is the pattern that will be discussed in the subsequent essays.

Where did this "solution" come from? The basic analysis and E. interpretation presented here, the structure and subject matter identified with the six bulleted motifs, was developed in posts to the online Tarot mailing list Tarot-L, largely from the Summer of 2000 through the Spring of 2001. The post presenting the embryonic, first-draft outline of this essay was in February of 2002. (It refers back to a post by Christian Joachim Hartmann, so I've included a link to that one as well. Christian discusses an analysis presented by Thierry Depaulis, which originally derives from Chapter 20 of Dummett's *The Game of Tarot*.) Links to some of these posts in the TarotL archives, along with some related posts by James W. Revak and my replies, are included in the following list. (You must subscribe to the TarotL mailing list to access their archives.)

@ 06/13/00 HARTMANN: Order of Triumphs
 @ 06/25/00 The "Christian Tarot"
 @ 11/13/00 Tarot vs Tarot, Archetypes and Anachronism, "Christ cards", etc.
 @ 01/30/01 Who's with whom?
 @ 01/18/01 The 22 Trumps: 22+1
 @ 03/28/01 Justice and Fortitude in the 13th Century
 @ 03/29/01 The Virtues of TdM
 @ 11/18/01 TdM and Heterodoxy - 1 of 4
 @ 11/18/01 TdM and Heterodoxy - 2 of 4
 @ 11/18/01 TdM and Heterodoxy - 3 of 4
 @ 11/18/01 TdM and Heterodoxy - 4 of 4
 (Those four posts were revised into The Mendicant's Tale)
 @ 02/09/02 Shellfish by Moonlight
 @ 02/18/02 **The Order of the Cards**
 @ 04/25/02 Themes of Death and Tarot
 @ 07/30/02 REVAK: A Medieval Universal Encyclopedia (Part 1 of 3)
 @ 07/30/02 REVAK: A Medieval Universal Encyclopedia (Part 2 of 3)
 @ 07/30/02 REVAK: A Medieval Universal Encyclopedia (Part 3 of 3)
 @ 08/01/02 A Visual Synopsis of Christian Salvation
 @ 11/15/02 The Question of the Sun (Boethius)
 @ 11/15/02 The Question of the Sun (Boethius)
 @ 11/16/03 REVAK: Salvation Cycle
 @ 11/17/03 A Visual Synopsis of Christian Salvation

We also know what Tarot was F. *not*. Among the more popular contemporary notions are the following:

• occult		Qabalistic/astrological				systems
• neo-Gnostic	Holy	Blood,	Holy	Grail	flash	cards
• a		mystical				journey
• a		Neoplatonic				cosmograph
• an						Apocalypse
• neo-Jungian		archetypes,		universal		symbols

Some of these approaches to the historical analysis of Tarot are considered in detail elsewhere on this site, in the Book Reviews. While there is no reason why Tarot enthusiasts should not enjoy the interpretations they find meaningful, there is also no reason to pretend that they make sense historically or can explain the subjects and sequence of the trumps. The Tarot trump cycle was no more a representation of these things than Holbein's *Dance of Death* was. Yes, the identifiable motifs represented are spiritual and allow mystical interpretation, and they do form a hierarchy. However, even that is not their primary significance, the literal design of the cycle. Regarding today's popular theories, the traditional occult systems of correspondence are wholly arbitrary. (See O'Neill's *Tarot Symbolism*.) The central ideas behind the *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* theories have no historical support, much less any representation in Tarot. There is little in the trump images to suggest a journey of any sort. Although the Moon and Sun appear in the trumps, there is nothing to support a cosmographic interpretation, and several conclusive contraindications. There are certainly eschatological elements in the trumps, but only the highest-ranking ones; this was a conventional terminus for many types of works, and does not indicate that the lower-ranking images are also from Revelation (or the Old Testament prophets). Finally, rather than universal symbols so dear to the hearts of contemporary Tarot enthusiasts, the Tarot images represented identifiable conventions characteristic of the culture that created Tarot. Any author who fails to recognize that conventional symbolism cannot be relied on discern any deeper or more subtle symbolic meanings either, although they may invent any number of them and impose these preferred meanings on the cards.

Cross-cultural comparisons, including echoes of Joseph G. Campbell's "Universal Monomyth" C.G. Jung's *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, and Aldous Huxley's mystical *Perennial Philosophy* are often applied to Tarot by contemporary enthusiasts. Without exception, these have been based on conscious revisionings and subconscious projections. Not all of the symbolic interpretations of Tarot enthusiasts are necessarily mistaken, and in fact this might someday be one of the most interesting approaches to a deeper understanding of the trump cycle. In the section *Structure Conveys Meaning* it was noted that the Tarot images are not universal symbols, but rather the conventions of late-medieval Roman Catholic Italy. This does not mean that they cannot be examined more deeply, as symbols, if and when they are correctly understood for their conventional meaning. Previously, however, such interpretations were premature. There has been no understanding of the original content of Tarot, its intended meaning in the context of its native culture, on which to base such studies and comparisons. Projections and revisionings therefore provided the only available foundation for these speculations. A good study of Tarot by an art historian, focusing on the face-value meanings of the cards and their sequence, explicating in detail the subject matter of the trumps and the significance of their sequence, and placing Tarot in the context of late medieval didactic art, (in particular, the context of related works and the pervasive Roman Catholic sensibilities), is a necessary prerequisite for legitimate cross-cultural anthropological, psychological, or religious comparisons. In the absence of such historical understanding, free-associating about the trump images is no more insightful than spinning "archetypal" tales about images at random from old magazines on a doctor's waiting-room table.

Having uncovered and dusted off the actual historical meaning of the trump cycle, coaxing the mystery to give up her secrets, we can begin to meaningfully address that question which generations of over-enthusiastic Tarot interpreters have attempted to answer by guesswork:

What is the spiritual significance of the Tarot trumps?

The Tarot trump cycle can now be seen in its original context, alongside other examples of the various incorporated motifs, each with its own spiritual (and political) significance. Admittedly, this will not appeal to many contemporary Tarot enthusiasts. They have little understanding of, and less interest in, the antiquated (at least from their viewpoint) spiritual message of the Three Estates, the Fall of Princes, the Dance of Death, or ultimate victory over the Devil and Death. How depressingly *mediæval* and *Christian* these things seem! Modern Tarotists will still prefer their divinatory meanings and "archetypal" projections, Renaissance humanism, Pagan symbolism, Neoplatonic magic and mysticism, and modern fictions of Gnostic Magdalene-cult heresies and anti-Catholic conspiracy theories over medieval Stoic ethics and mainstream Roman Catholic eschatology, even with its mystical interpretation. Nonetheless, a real spiritual message is present in the trump cycle even before its modern revisioning. It is profound, complex, and it includes subtleties and beauty beyond the range of simplistic Cabalistic correspondences or the projections of neo-Jungian archetypes. It details the spiritual facts of life as understood by Christian Europe for well over a thousand years: In a neatly structured encyclopedia of salvation within the popular *Trionfo della Morte* tradition, Tarot shows the triumph of Death in this world and the ultimate triumph of God over all, the last enemy to be destroyed being Death.

Mysterium Mortis

Death does not outrage our reason
nor confound our faith.
Death is indeed not an end
but a beginning, starting with a
moment of truth on which the whole of
one's life and experience is brought to bear.
Ladislaus Boros